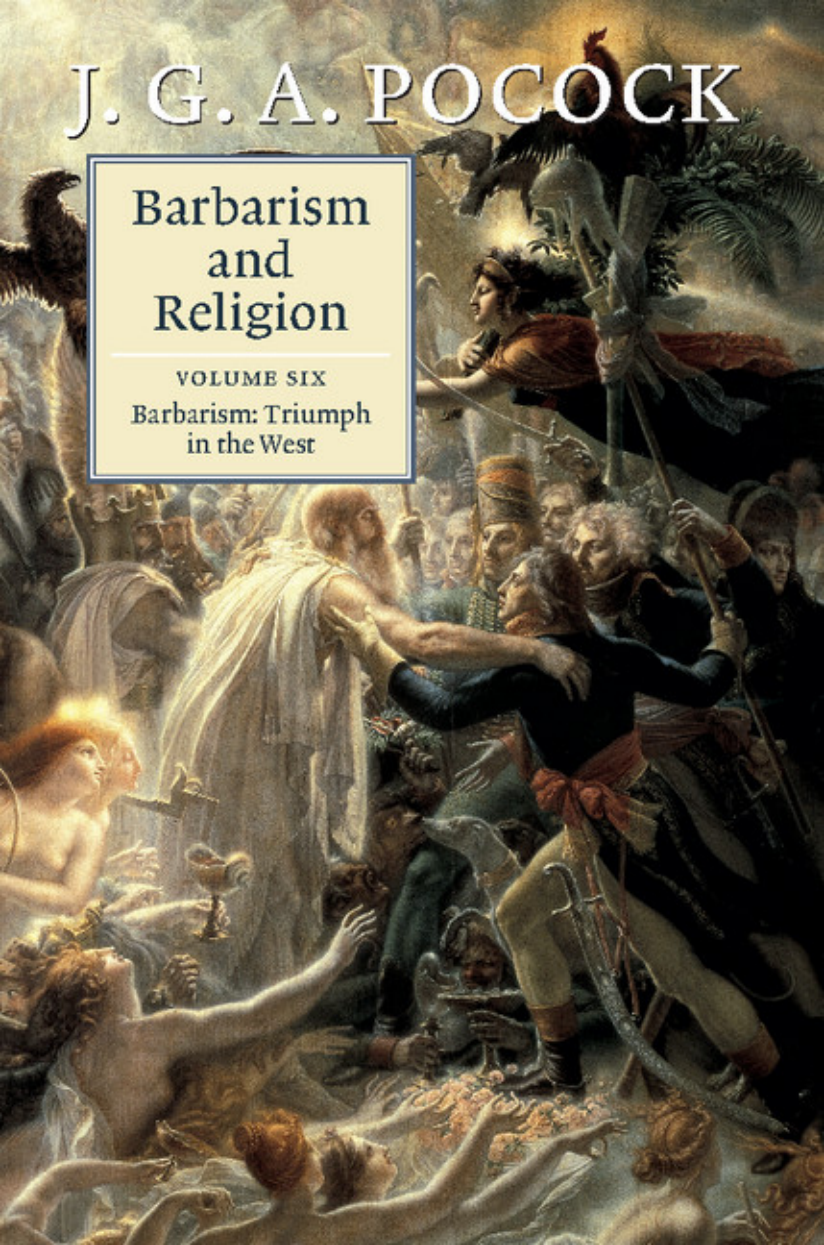




J. G. A. POCOCK

Barbarism and Religion

VOLUME SIX

Barbarism: Triumph
in the West

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Barbarism and Religion

Volume Six

This sixth and final volume in John Pocock's acclaimed sequence of works on *Barbarism and Religion* examines Volumes II and III of Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, carrying Gibbon's narrative to the end of empire in the west. "It makes two general assertions: first, that this is in reality a mosaic of narratives, written on diverse premises and never fully synthesised with one another; and second, that these chapters assert a progress of both barbarism and religion from east to west, leaving much history behind as they do so." The magnitude of *Barbarism and Religion* is already apparent. *Barbarism: Triumph in the West* represents the culmination of a remarkable attempt to discover and present what Gibbon was saying, what he meant by it, and why he said it in the ways that he did, as well as an unparalleled contribution to the historiography of Enlightened Europe.

J. G. A. POCKOCK was born in London and brought up in Christchurch, New Zealand, and educated at the Universities of Canterbury and Cambridge. He is now Harry C. Black Professor of History Emeritus at the Johns Hopkins University and an Honorary Fellow of St John's College, Cambridge. His many seminal works on intellectual history include *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (1957, second edition 1987), *Politics, Language and Time* (1971), *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975, second edition 2003), *Virtue, Commerce and History* (1985), *The Discovery of Islands* (2005), *Political Thought and History* (2009) and five volumes in an ongoing sequence, initiated in 1999, on *Barbarism and Religion*. He has also edited *The Political Works of James Harrington* (1977) and Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1987), as well as the collaborative study *The Varieties of British Political Thought* (1995). A Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy and of the Royal Historical Society, Professor Pocock is also a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and of the American Philosophical Society. He was appointed an Officer of the Order of New Zealand Merit in 2002.

Barbarism and Religion

Barbarism: Triumph in the West

Volume Six

J. G. A. Pocock



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To the memory of Michel Baridon, 1927–2009

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The volume is dedicated to the memory of Michel Baridon, whose *Edward Gibbon et le mythe de Rome* (1978) placed him among the pioneers of modern Gibbon interpretation. To his name must instantly be added those of Patricia Craddock and David Womersley; and I add those of others whose role in the shaping of my project has far exceeded their presence in its footnotes: the late Istvan Hont, Robert Mankin, Nicholas Phillipson, Orest Ranum, John Robertson and Brian Young. And I cannot conclude the series *Barbarism and Religion* without expressing my unlimited and affectionate gratitude to Richard Fisher, whose insight and encouragement, extended to all six volumes over a period of nearly twenty years, exceed all measure of praise and thanks. My debt to my wife and family remains inexpressible, as it was in her lifetime.

Advice to readers

Like the preceding volumes in this series, this is intended as a contribution to the history of historiography, and is not to be read as offering a history of the late Roman empire or the first centuries of the Christian church. Where I have made use of recent scholarship on these two great subjects, it has not been with the intention of evaluating Gibbon's history or those written by his contemporaries, or (though this is still possible) of treating him or them as engaged in problems they share with recent historians; but with that of understanding the histories they wrote and the kinds of histories they were writing. The history of historiography is a discipline (or a group of sub-disciplines) that has, for reasons themselves historical, been neglected to the point where its character and methods still need to be agreed on; and in these volumes I have found myself studying the *Decline and Fall* both as a very great text in its own right, and as the centrepiece of a portrait of early modern historiography in its last phase before the revolutionary transformation it underwent in the following century.

For this reason, historians other than Gibbon, with whose work his was engaged – Tillemont in particular among them – have been allowed to speak at length in their own voices, and I have endeavoured to present and interpret them as well as him. In both cases I have often reported them in the historic present tense, as narratives we may read and experience in themselves before going on to examine them as acts of speech performed in past history. It is necessary, of course, to preserve their historic and sometimes archaic character in order to understand them; and I have continued the practice of transcribing works printed in eighteenth-century French so as to preserve their now obsolete spelling, punctuation and (especially) accentuation. This may trouble the eye of the modern reader, but it would have distorted their historicity to modernise their visual appearance. For the same reason, I have retained Gibbon's spellings of late-antique names – e.g., 'Genseric', 'Jornandes' – where these have now been abandoned in favour of others.

My aim has been to return the reader to the world of the eighteenth century and its historical culture.

All translations are my own except where I have used Loeb editions of Latin and Greek authors, or employed contemporary English translations from the French. It may be desirable to reiterate that *Decline and Fall* in italic refers to the book, Decline and Fall in roman to the concept.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations of book titles have been regularly employed.

<i>A</i>	John Murray (ed.): <i>The Autobiography of Edward Gibbon</i> . Second edition. London: John Murray, 1897.
<i>BSE</i>	J. G. A. Pocock: <i>Barbarism and Religion</i> , volume IV: <i>Barbarians, Savages and Empires</i> . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
<i>BUH</i>	Jean Le Clerc: <i>Bibliothèque universelle et historique. Réimpression de l'édition d'Amsterdam, 1686–1693</i> . Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1968.
<i>EE</i>	Patricia B. Craddock (ed.): <i>The English Essays of Edward Gibbon</i> . Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972.
<i>EEG</i>	J. G. A. Pocock: <i>Barbarism and Religion</i> , volume I: <i>The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon 1737–1764</i> . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
<i>EGLH</i>	Patricia B. Craddock: <i>Edward Gibbon, Luminous Historian, 1772–1794</i> . Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.
<i>Empereurs</i>	Louis Sebastien Le Nain de Tillemont: <i>Histoire des Empereurs et des autres princes qui ont régné durant les six premiers siècles de l'église, de leurs guerres contre les Juifs, des écrivains profanes, et des personnes les plus illustres de leurs temps</i> . Brussels, 1732–40.
<i>FDF</i>	J. G. A. Pocock. <i>Barbarism and Religion</i> , volume III: <i>The First Decline and Fall</i> . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
<i>Journal B</i>	Georges A. Bonnard (ed.): <i>Le Journal de Gibbon à Lausanne: 17 Août 1763–19 Avril 1764</i> . Lausanne: Librairie de l'Université, 1945.
<i>Journal C</i>	Georges A. Bonnard (ed.): <i>Gibbon's Journey from Geneva to Rome: his Journal from 20 April to 2</i>

- October 1764*. London and New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1961.
- Letters* J. E. Norton (ed.): *The Letters of Edward Gibbon*. 3 volumes. London: Cassell, 1956.
- Mémoires* Louis Sebastien Le Nain de Tillemont. *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire ecclésiastique des six premiers siècles*. 16 volumes separately subtitled. Paris, 1693–1712.
- NCG* J. G. A. Pocock: *Barbarism and Religion*, volume II: *Narratives of Civil Government*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- RFT* J. G. A. Pocock. *Barbarism and Religion*, volume v: *Religion: The First Triumph*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Womersley, 1994 David Womersley (ed.): *Edward Gibbon: The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Three volumes. Harmondsworth: Allen Lane, Penguin Press, 1994.
- YEG* Patricia B. Craddock: *Young Edward Gibbon, Gentleman of Letters*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982.

Introduction

This volume, which concludes the series, differs from its predecessors in laying rather less emphasis on the establishment of contexts in which the *Decline and Fall* may be read, and rather more on the pursuit of Gibbon's text, and therefore of his narrative, through the historical sequence which it relates. It consists of a critical enquiry into the succession of chapters making up the second and third volumes of his work, which Gibbon published in 1781, five years after the first, to which *Barbarism and Religion* has been paying attention so far. Volume I of the *Decline and Fall* related the crisis and transformation of the Antonine monarchy, which claimed continuity with the Augustan principate, and its remodeling as a military and taxative system, first by Diocletian and then by Constantine. The dominant narrative so far, forming a 'context' in which Gibbon is to be read, was that of the separation of military from civic capacity, so that soldiers were no longer citizens and emperors were no longer magistrates; a narrative which had taken shape in republican antiquity and had been reformulated by humanists in Renaissance Europe, by whom it was considered a sufficient explanation of the Decline and Fall itself. A tragical nostalgia for Roman virtue persisted into the Enlightened Europe in which Gibbon wrote, side by side though sometimes at tension with the 'Enlightened narrative' indicating the replacement of ancient military virtue by the modern system of commerce and manners, by which Europe had freed itself from the wars of religion. This second grand narrative forms a deep background and further context to Gibbon's writing, but he continued to explain the ruin of the ancient world by the self-destruction of ancient values, and therefore to write a late humanist or early modern history.

At the end of chapter 14 of his first volume, however, Gibbon declared that Constantine, in addition to perpetuating the changes wrought by Diocletian, had taken two revolutionary steps: the foundation of the new capital city that bore his name on the Bosphorus, and the establishment of Christianity as the state religion of the empire. Neither statement was in any way new in European historiography, but their impact on the

structure of the *Decline and Fall* was so drastic that there is room for the view that Gibbon was insufficiently prepared to make them. In Volume v of *Barbarism and Religion* it is related how he took a last-minute decision to add the second of them to his volume of 1776 as chapters 15 and 16, and how the exposed position of these chapters led to the belief that the Enlightened religious scepticism they contain expressed Gibbon's true purpose in writing the *Decline and Fall* as an anti-Christian polemic. In Volume v and the present volume of *Barbarism and Religion*, it is contended that this reading cannot be justified; that Gibbon's primary purpose was to relate and explain the decline and fall of the Roman empire, in which the role of the Christian Church was so complex and multivalent that it can form only part of the narrative he was pursuing; but that there is a sense in which it transcends that narrative. Gibbon was interested in Christianity as a historical, not an extra-historical phenomenon, and as less a cause of the empire's fall than the replacement of ancient civilisation by a new one, in what he termed 'modern' history. At this point the *Decline and Fall* becomes 'the triumph of barbarism and religion', and Gibbon's narrative becomes a prelude to the 'Enlightened narrative'.

As history of historiography, the importance of chapter 15 lies in Gibbon's acceptance, as central to the narrative of *Decline and Fall*, of a species of historiography new to his text but not to him nor, certainly, to his Christian readers, to whom it was nearly coeval with their faith itself: the language of Christian historiography both sacred and ecclesiastical. It possessed its own vocabulary and literature, a class and profession of skilled exegetes, and a long history of controversy and debate. From this moment Gibbon would have to learn to write in it – he had probably been studying it for many years – and both to engage in it and write its history; a formidable challenge to which he seems to have been equal. He found it, of course, deeply uncongenial – many of its premises seemed to him unreasonable and even absurd – but he had to admit it to his history as one of the contexts in which that history and his text from now on would have to proceed, and merely to dismiss and deride it would not be sufficient. He had to treat it as history, taking it seriously until it called for an act of faith he was never going to perform. As this volume of *Barbarism and Religion* explores the text of the *Decline and Fall*'s second volume, Gibbon will be found presenting the Arian controversy in detail and with thoroughness, as a series of dilemmas both intellectual and practical, which were real to those involved in it for reasons that can be understood. Simultaneously, however – and perhaps this is the point at which his relationship to Enlightenment can best be understood – he can be seen explaining why any act of faith in an absolute God, especially when

supported by philosophy, is necessarily intolerant. There is a case for regarding the *Decline and Fall* as a sustained history of intolerance, a phenomenon new in the history of religion and society, though Gibbon here will be found to have had predecessors.

From this point, then, the *Decline and Fall* becomes a history 'as well ecclesiastical as civil'; one 'modern' in the sense in which Gibbon used the term, opposing it directly to 'ancient', as marked by the presence of a church competitive with the state. The church possessed its own narrative, which he must relate concurrently with the narrative of empire; and it is at this point that we must recognise that Gibbon was still an early modern historian, among the last and perhaps the greatest of those obliged to regard 'history' as having already been related by the historians of antiquity, whose authority compelled the modern historian to criticise and re-narrate what they placed before him, but never to replace it altogether by a narrative re-synthesised by his own capacity to work from independent sources of evidence. He now had before him two kinds of histories, for which he was indebted to two sets of historians; and his vigorous scepticism as to one set's claim to be narrating sacred actions performed by God in the world did not free him from the need to follow their narratives without replacing them. The historian of historiography is obliged to scrutinise and report how Gibbon went about doing this in his second volume and those following it.

The history of the *Decline and Fall* therefore becomes a plural history, concerned with how Gibbon related to histories without uniting them. There are narratives 'as well ecclesiastical as civil', the latter usually related before the former, and Gibbon's powers are displayed, in his second volume especially, in his ability to present thoughts and actions he considered based on unreal and nonsensical assumptions, while making it clear why they were desperately real to those making these assumptions. This is especially the case with his treatment of the great controversies following the Council of Nicaea; his statement that these were based on 'the abuse of philosophy' is balanced by his admiration for Athanasius. He was not again accused, at the level reached in the controversy over chapters 15 and 16, of exiling religion from history by means of the 'sneer' alone.

The duality of civil and ecclesiastical history is not the only force making these volumes of the *Decline and Fall* a plurality of narratives, through which Gibbon, his text and his readers must all make their way. The second volume turns from the histories of the reign of Constantius to what is here termed the 'interlude' of Julian the Apostate, an exercise in 'sentimental' history, meaning that it is recorded largely in terms of the sensibility and subjectivity of a single dominant individual. The 'history'

proper of this reign is supplied by the ‘ancient’ Ammianus Marcellinus, the last Roman historian for whom Gibbon felt respect; the *vie de Julien* – not quite the same as a history – by the French ‘modern’ La Blérierie. Gibbon is now interacting regularly with modern historians, usually French, whose outlook may be very different from his: for church history at large the Jansenist Tillemont, who proves to have been more of a historian and less of a laborious antiquarian than Gibbon allows him to have been; for Julian La Blérierie; and in the concluding section of volume II the Sinologue Joseph de Guignes, a notable presence in *Barbarism and Religion*’s fourth volume. In these chapters Gibbon begins to narrate the fall of the western empire at barbarian hands, set in motion by the Huns displacing the Goths north of the lower Danube, and Gibbon makes use of de Guignes’s scenario of steppe nomads recoiling from the Chinese frontiers and initiating a snowball effect that will send the Huns into the *barbaricum* later to be called Europe. The great work of the Jesuits on Chinese history joins forces – at least in Gibbon’s mind – with the stadial schemes of Scottish conjectural history of society. The history of the *Decline and Fall* is part of the historiography, still early modern, of Enlightened Europe.

Gibbon therefore presents, and is at the same time involved in, a series of historiographies as well as histories, based on their several sources and requiring to be written according to several sets of historiographic conventions: histories as well ecclesiastical as civil, eastern as well as western, philosophical as well as erudite, concerned with the actions of barbarians as well as of civilised Romans and Greeks; though strictly speaking, barbarians being pre-literate should have no history because they write no histories. It is Gibbon’s problem to conduct his readers from one to another of these modes of historical narrative, and there are times when this strains or exceeds the capacity of his historical culture. It was for modern rather than early modern historians to claim to have brought all histories together, and for post-moderns to criticise this assertion.

To the thesis that new subjects entailed new historical narratives, and that Gibbon set about relating them in conjunction, there is one major exception, of great significance to the future volumes of the *Decline and Fall*. At the end of chapter 14, preceding even the establishment of Christianity, Gibbon situated the foundation of Constantinople as the first revolutionary act of the emperor Constantine; and in chapter 17, the first of the volumes of 1781, he set about presenting the city on the Bosphorus, and the governing culture shaped at and by it, as not only a new imperial capital, but the seat of a new kind of empire, of which the city and culture of Rome now became a part. There rapidly took shape in Gibbon’s writings a division of the empire into two cultures, the one

Greek or rather Hellenistic, the other Latin and increasingly barbarian; and it becomes a question for his readers whether the concept and the history of *Decline and Fall* are not western-centred, so that it becomes necessary to write a western history along lines already laid down, and – as suggested by Flavio Biondo in the fifteenth century – necessary to write of an eastern Decline and Fall, culminating a thousand years after that of the western, as caused by historical processes altogether different. This question must have confronted Gibbon from the first schematisation of his history in 1776, when he proposed a tripartite chronology, in which the periods from Justinian to Charlemagne, and from Charlemagne to the fall of Constantinople, should succeed that which he carried to completion in 1781. But was it not only the period before these which was to be a history of the decline of ancient virtue and the end of classical Rome? The history of the fall of Rome to the barbarians, ‘the triumph of barbarism and religion’ and the Europe taking shape after it, led into what has been termed ‘the Enlightened narrative’ and did not apply to the history of Orthodox or Muslim civilisation.

Gibbon possessed, and was possessed by, a master narrative of west European history; to know whether he possessed a narrative of the empire ruled from Constantinople we may begin by asking whether the complex account of the institutions taking shape at the foundation of that city indicated any historical process set in motion by their structure. Did he set about visualising a ‘Byzantine’ history – he uses that word – which the new imperial order created, and subsequently suffered, of its own making? Though he does say in chapter 17 that a study of Byzantine government will indicate the sources of its strengths and weaknesses, it is hard to find in 1781 any sustained historical narratives arising from them. He has much to say about the weakening of the armies and the powers of provincial governors resulting from decisions taken by Constantine; he does not point out that the barbarisation of the armies and the progressive barbarisation of the provinces, fundamental to his account of Decline and Fall, takes place along the upper Danube and the Rhine, but never along the frontier facing the Persian empire, or indeed in the dioceses of Asia, Syria and Egypt. Decline and Fall, we might very well argue, is a European process, indeed west European. How then did Gibbon go about writing the later stages of his original scheme?

This volume presents and explores the sequence of chapters making up volumes II and III of the *Decline and Fall*, and carrying Gibbon’s narrative to the end of empire in the west. It makes two general assertions: the first, as we have seen, that this is in reality a mosaic of narratives, written on diverse premises and never fully synthesised with one another; the second, that these chapters assert a progress of both barbarism and religion from

east to west, leaving much history behind as they do so. The Goths forced by the Huns across the lower Danube destroy the field army of the eastern empire in Europe; they are accepted within it by Theodosius I; but at his death a complex of pressures cause Alaric to move his men west, where their looting of Rome in 410 is of more symbolic than practical importance. Meanwhile there has occurred a second barbarian invasion originating (Gibbon thinks) in distant Asia: that of Vandals and others across the Rhine into Gaul and Spain, which together with Britain pass out of imperial control; and at Alaric's death the Visigoths enter this region, establishing themselves in Aquitaine. The major outcome of these invasions will be the Vandal seizure of Roman Africa: the central event – Gibbon insists with some support from contemporary French historiography – in the barbarian destruction of western Roman authority, since it destroys the prosperity of Italy and the city of Rome, and renders impossible any intervention by the eastern empire. The devastating inroads of Attila's Huns are peripheral to all this, important mainly because they leave behind them a chaos of mercenaries from the *barbaricum* beyond the Alps and the Danube, with which no warlord in Italy is able to cope; hence the termination of western empire, and the first if not the last grand climax of Gibbon's history.

All this is preceded, however, in the sequence of chapters by the ecclesiastical history of the reign of Theodosius I. He succeeds in destroying the power of the Arian heresy, which has dominated the eastern church since the time of Constantine himself, and establishes an intolerant Trinitarian orthodoxy in both west and east. In the west, however, he encounters the spiritual power, and is outaced by Ambrose of Milan in the first of the great confrontations of Latin medieval history. Gibbon now inserts a chapter in the philosophical history of religion, narrating the transformation of Christianity into a quasi-polytheism by the ascription of sacred powers to saints and martyrs, their relics and their miracles. The Christians cease to defy civil society in the role of enthusiasts, and set out instead to rule it by the power of superstition; an assertion as Protestant as it became Enlightened.

This is the last appearance of ecclesiastical history in the *Decline and Fall* of 1781; the triumph of barbarism follows and eclipses the initial victories of religion. There has been only a minimum of eastern history in volume III, and the great controversies of Ephesus and Chalcedon in the reign of Theodosius II are postponed unmentioned until a chapter not appearing until the end of volume IV seven years later. The triumph of barbarism dominates what remains of volume III, as already recounted; but once again Gibbon adds concluding chapters that break new ground after what has seemed to terminate his narrative. Chapter 38 narrates the rise of the

true victor among the western barbarians, the kingdom of the Franks, and proceeds to explore the controversy, beginning with Boulainvilliers and culminating with Mably, but also with Sieyès in the first years of Revolution, as to whether the French *noblesse* owed its feudal powers to Frankish conquests over the Gallo-Romans, or whether the *monarchie françoise* had from the beginning been Roman in character and founded in Roman law. The chapter opens up the prospect of a history of the medieval and post-Roman western kingdoms, as a history of legal conflict between unwritten barbarian custom and written Roman law; a history, Gibbon went on to indicate, from which the Britain that became England had been excluded for half a millennium by the destruction of everything that was Roman, so that the English knew nothing of an age in which ‘the ancient constitution and the feudal law’ had been interchangeable terms. It is a remarkable conclusion – not least to the present author – to a history of the fall of empire in the west; but Gibbon here gives us little hint of what he meant by it.

Chapter 38, succeeded by *General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West*, brings to a close the volumes Gibbon published in 1781. It shows him so deeply interested in the history of the medieval west as to devote a chapter to opening up one of its major controversies, still going on as he wrote. Yet this is the point at which he is obliged to transfer his narrative from west to east, and embark on the ‘Byzantine’ history he has repeatedly said he is postponing to a further volume. That did not appear until 1788, as one of a trilogy of volumes carrying him to the fall of Constantinople and the conclusion of his history. The series *Barbarism and Religion* breaks off at this point, on the premise that the second trilogy differs from the first, in subject matter and method, in so many ways that it should be left to the exploration of other historians, with their own approaches.

The central assumption here is that the key thesis Gibbon has used so far – that the decline of Rome was due to the divorce between civil and military authority, producing a civilisation incapable of defending itself – has ceased to be of either narrative or explanatory value. It had from the start been a thesis Roman, Latin and western, rooted in a history to which Romans and west Europeans related themselves and were accustomed to narrate. When the scene shifted from Latin to Greek and from Europe to Asia, it ceased to be employable. There was no grand narrative relating how the valour and liberty of Athens and Sparta had decayed under the Macedonian kingdoms; even Polybius had at this point to resort to Roman history. As a further consequence, Hellenic history had become Hellenistic, that of Hellenised Asians, Syrians and Egyptians with no past record of armed liberty and discipline. It followed that there was no

grand narrative, of this or any other nature, for the empire Gibbon had begun to call 'Byzantine', though it had survived the empire of Rome proper for a thousand years. He had already described that millennium as one of 'premature and perpetual decay', indicating that it was hard to find any justification for its existence. It did not even exhibit a Decline and Fall in the sense used so far; the barbarisation of the armies and successively of the provinces had some presence on the Danubian frontier but none at all on the Euphrates. Historians since Flavio Biondo and before him had realised that for an *inclinatio* of the eastern empire they must wait for the Arab Muslim conquests after the reign of Heraclius, which had indeed altered the map of world civilisations on a scale exceeding anything achieved by the barbarians in western Europe – until their descendants became 'masters of the world' in a process Raynal had begun to criticise and explore – but was not the direct product of the empire's internal decay.

The central fact about the *Decline and Fall*'s second trilogy – I venture to suggest to those to whom I leave its study – is that Gibbon thought the east Romans (at least after Justinian) incapable of either enacting or writing a history of their own. He therefore described it, at the outset of his fifth volume, as 'passively connected' with 'important revolutions' taking place around it, and conceived his second trilogy as surveying these revolutions from a Byzantine starting point to be instantly left behind. Since they occurred in the histories of Latin west Europeans, Arab and Persian Muslims, Slavic and central Asian nomads from the world of Joseph de Guignes, a Russia taking shape to the north of them, and climactically the conquering Seljuk and Ottoman Turks, the second trilogy takes on the dimensions of a world history; but only in name is it a Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. I see myself as leaving this narrative to others; how they will see the later *Decline and Fall* is for them (if any there are) to tell their readers.

A reviewer of the earlier volumes of *Barbarism and Religion* asked, as I recall, the question 'where is the historian?' It is true that Gibbon the creator of his narrative is not the central figure of any of them. Rather, I have aimed to show him as acting in many contexts – some of them shared by historians who have been allowed to speak in their own voices which were not his – employing many discourses, and constantly encountering problems to which he proposed solutions that were themselves the occasion of further problems. Sometimes my purpose has been less to present Gibbon than to explore and describe the historiographic culture of the era in which he wrote. In consequence I am conscious of having depicted him as the solver of problems, himself problematic, which he was, than as the great master of historical narrative which he was also. I see no need to

apologise for this; my Gibbon is offered as a historical reality. If we ask the question 'what made Gibbon a great historian?' the possibility arises that the adjective 'great' lies more in the province of the student of literature than in that of the historian of speech acts and discourse generally, a characterisation with which I should be content. There remain the historical questions whether Gibbon in any way innovated in the treatment of late antique history, and whether he can be shown to have changed it; the latter at least belongs to the history of how his work was received over time, and this is not attempted here. These volumes have been essentially an attempt to discover and present what he was saying, what he meant by it, why he said it in the ways that he did, and how he is to be understood in the setting of eighteenth-century Anglo-French historiography.

Part I

The Constantinian Empire

1 Constantinople: a new city and a new history

(I)

Five years (1776 to 1781) went by before Gibbon returned to the point reached at the end of chapter 14 of the *Decline and Fall*, when he had announced that ‘the foundation of Constantinople and the establishment of the Christian religion were the immediate and memorable consequences’ of Constantine’s victory over the last of his rivals for the succession to Diocletian. These years were taken up with the composition of his second and third volumes, which carry him to the extinction of imperial authority in the western provinces of the Roman empire. For reasons central to the formation of European historiography and the idea of Europe itself, this process has come to define the concept of Decline and Fall, and it would have been understandable if Gibbon had brought his history to an end at that point. In his preface of 1776, he made it known that this possibility existed, but that there was an alternative to which he felt sufficient though less commitment: that of continuing the narrative to the fall of Constantinople eleven and a half centuries after its foundation. The end of western empire, however, could not be narrated without attention to what seemed the refoundation of the empire with an eastern capital, and had for centuries been considered as possibly the consequence of that process. Gibbon’s fifteenth- and sixteenth-century predecessors – Bruni, Biondo, Mexía¹ – had discussed that problem, and had faced yet another: the eastern empire had a millennium-long history of its own, having to be recounted in terms other than those used in narrating the history of the post-imperial west that became known as ‘Europe’. They had faced the problem, in other words, of whether east Roman history could be narrated concurrently with west European, and had for the most part decided – as Gibbon himself was to decide – that it could not.

Attempting to write his autobiography a decade after completing his history, Gibbon told of a schoolboy experience² in which he had

¹ For these figures see *FDF*, chs. 8, 9, 11. ² *EEG*, pp. 28–42.

encountered east Roman history and its problems, apparently for the first time, in the writings of English historians of the late seventeenth century, one of whom, William Howel, is a significant presence in the footnotes to the first chapter (number 17) of Gibbon's second volume. Howel was fundamentally a clerical historian, and Gibbon made use of him as a lesser companion to Le Nain de Tillemont's *Histoire des Empereurs*, the companion series to the great Jansenist's *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire ecclésiastique*.³ As the fourteen-year-old Gibbon had discovered at Stourhead, the history of the divergence between eastern and western empire was inseparable from the history of the Christian Church, 'the foundation of Constantinople' from 'the establishment of the Christian religion'. Not only, however, had that establishment taken a very different form in Constantinople from that it assumed in a west where the city of Rome ceased to be imperial and in the course of centuries became papal; the history of the church challenged historiography itself by claiming to include it within a sacred history that might not be one which historians were capable of writing. We see Gibbon as faced by this challenge, and the *Decline and Fall* as a Protestant-Enlightened response to Augustine's *City of God*. Gibbon, it will be found, pays significantly little attention to that book; but it is no accident that chapter 17 is the immediate successor – albeit after a five-year interval – to the two chapters concluding volume I of the *Decline and Fall* and examined in Volume V of *Barbarism and Religion*.

Between 1776 and 1781, therefore, Gibbon faced two vast challenges for which the writing of his first volume (even of chapters 15 and 16) had done little to prepare him: that of dividing the history of empire between an eastern and a western narrative, and that of dividing history itself (if this could indeed be done) between a secular and an ecclesiastical narrative. In using the term 'secular', we are employing language somewhat more modern than his, collapsing the distinctions between classical narrative, humanist philology, and Enlightened philosophy that go to make up our model of the history of western historiography. It was only the last of these that offered to substitute the history of human society and the human mind for history as the work of God, thus giving the concept of the 'secular' the full meaning we attach to it; but while Gibbon is plainly attracted by this project and the *Decline and Fall* can be (and has been) read as putting it into effect, his volumes are not to be read as carrying it out systematically. His preface of 1776 tells us that he is in two minds about how and whether to deal with the division of history between east and west, but tells us nothing at all about his approach to its division

³ For the relation between the two works, see *FDF*, pp. 332–8; *RFT*, pp. 47–8.

between ecclesiastical and imperial.⁴ It is therefore possible, and may be preferable, to embark upon reading the opening of volume II as Gibbon's successive encounters with new forms of historical narrative and the problems with which they faced him.

That volumes II and III took five years to complete may be explained in several ways. There was his six-months' stay in Paris during 1777, which furthered his research but delayed his writing; there was the need to write the *Vindication* against his Oxford critics (1779) and the *Mémoire justificatif* in the same year; there was his parliamentary attendance and the financial worries which obliged him to seek a place under government;⁵ and perhaps above all, there was the decision to extend the second into a third volume, and arrive at the end of the western empire, beyond which he might never have gone. He published nothing more for a further seven years. There had never been a time, however, when completing the western decline was not on his mind, and we know that the five opening chapters, 17 through 21, which study the reigns of Constantine and Constantius down to the advent of Julian the Apostate, began to concern him as early as 1776. He found them exceptionally challenging –

It is difficult to arrange with order and perspicuity the various transactions of the age of Constantine; and so much was I displeased with the first Essay, that I committed to the flames above fifty sheets⁶ –

and the final account has been recognised by scholars as a segment of the *Decline and Fall* needing careful study.⁷ As chapters 1 through 3 introduce the Antonine empire and the 'secret poison' that will in the end destroy it,⁸ these chapters introduce the empire set up by Constantine, including his new city, and give causes for its decay. Here, however, paradoxes arise. The poison is hardly secret, but its effects will be various; the collapse of empire in the west will take a century and a half – about as long as the period separating Constantine from Commodus – but the imperial structure will endure in the east long enough to make the paradigm of Decline and Fall itself doubtful. Looming behind this problem is that of ecclesiastical history and how to relate it in connection with that of empire; and Gibbon supplies three chapters of the latter before turning to the former.

⁴ *NCG*, pp. 372–80.

⁵ For a detailed study of Gibbon's life and work during these years, see *EGLH*, pp. 79–163 (Part II, chs. 5–8).

⁶ *A*, pp. 315–16. 'Sheets' is a typographic term; whatever it meant when applied to manuscript, it is evident that Gibbon destroyed a lengthy draft with which he had become dissatisfied.

⁷ Jordan, 1971; *EGLH*, pp. 79–163 (Part II, chs. 5–8); Womersley, 1994, I, pp. xlii–xlv.

⁸ *FDF*, ch. 17.

Surveying ‘the age of Constantine’, therefore, is no easy matter; it introduces new kinds of history, and hesitations and ambiguities between them; and the first to appear is the question whether a historical narrative centred on Constantinople can continue that of Rome and the departure of empire from it.

(II)

After a tranquil and prosperous reign, the Conqueror bequeathed to his family the inheritance of the Roman Empire; a new capital, a new policy, and a new religion; and the innovations which he established have been embraced and consecrated by succeeding generations.⁹

As is common with Gibbon, there is death in the pot; the ‘tranquil and prosperous reign’ is to disintegrate in dynastic failure among his sons and unparalleled disaster under the successors to his grandnephew, and it is to be a question what part ‘the innovations which he established’ played in the Decline and Fall’s next climax. Gibbon continues by emphasising the differences between the narrative of human actions and the narrative of human institutions.

The age of the great Constantine and his sons is filled with important events, but the historian must be oppressed by their number and variety, unless he diligently separates from each other the scenes which are connected only by the order of time. He will describe the political institutions that gave strength and stability to the empire, before he proceeds to relate the wars and revolutions which hastened its decline. He will adopt the division unknown to the ancients, of civil and ecclesiastical affairs: the victory of the Christians, and their intestine discord, will supply copious and distinct materials both for edification and for scandal.¹⁰

There is a long way to go before we reach the concluding irony. More immediately, a mere seventeen pages in the modern edition separate us from an apparent but significant contradiction. ‘Wars and revolutions’, we have just been told, ‘hasten [the empire’s] decline’; ‘political institutions’ give it ‘strength and stability’. When Gibbon returns to the study of institutions, however, we learn that

The distinct view of the complicated system of policy, introduced by Diocletian, improved by Constantine, and completed by his immediate successors, may not only amuse the fancy by the singular picture of a great empire, but will tend to illuminate the secret and internal causes of its rapid decay¹¹

⁹ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 585. ‘Policy’ carries wider meanings than those now given it.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* ¹¹ p. 602.

so that the ‘institutions that gave strength and stability’ themselves contain the causes of its decline and decay, which can have been ‘rapid’ only in the western provinces. Are we to deliver Gibbon from this contradiction by supposing him to say that the institutions he is about to describe lasted in the east while they collapsed in the west? If so, we must begin by accepting that the history established at Constantinople differed in course and structure from that which shaped the decline of Rome. This we may do by considering Gibbon’s account of a ‘new city’ before turning to the ‘new policy’ and the ‘new religion’.

It is valuable to note that chapter 17 begins with description, not narrative, but that the description has its place in a macronarrative. The history of the *Decline and Fall* as we know it and as Gibbon at least remembered it,¹² begins with a vision of Rome ruined and reborn, perceived in 1764 by a visitor seated on the Capitol, and suggesting the idea of a history recounting the abandonment of the city by its empire, until its republican and imperial ruins sat solitary among the nations of Christian Europe. Constantine’s foundation of a new Rome on the Bosphorus was climactic in the history of this abandonment,¹³ and furthered the division of the empire into east and west which was to determine its future history and divide the historiography of Decline and Fall. Gibbon therefore began his renewed history with an account of new Rome: less, however, a narrative of Constantine’s decision to found it than a quasi-visual panorama of Constantinople (by his time Istanbul) and the chain of seas that are held to divide Europe from Asia. The reason for this is that he was now obliged to begin from the unfamiliar and the unvisited. There was no need to describe Rome; he had been there, as had or might be not a few of his readers, and his vision of history began – as we know from the *Essai sur l’étude de la littérature* – with an imaginative picture of the city’s emergence from Virgilian prehistory and the overlaying of the ancient by the medieval and the modern.¹⁴ This image was accessible as visual experience to those who could afford the costs of tourism, and could be seen and explored without departing from the culture known to western minds as European. There was no need to place it on a map or explore the geopolitics of its placement.

Constantinople on the other hand, even when reshaped as Istanbul, was the product of a foundational decision – Constantine had chosen its site out of a perception of its strategic location – and now lay in a cultural setting deeply alien and by no means easy to visit. Gibbon had no expectation of going there, and did not describe it to his readers as a place they

¹² *EEG*, pp. 283–91. ¹³ *FDF*, p. 490.

¹⁴ *EEG*, pp. 222–3, 281–5. Patterson, 1984; Gibbon, 1761, ed. Mankin, 2010.

might ever see for themselves; this is why his description is vividly panoramic and visual. It is based on the reports of that specialised class of early modern writers known as ‘travellers’:¹⁵ those impelled by interest and curiosity to bring back reports of antique and alien lands, accounts of their scenery, monuments and customs, from which ‘histories’ either descriptive or narrative might be constructed. There existed a specialised literature of travel, with critical standards the traveller might or might not meet; Gibbon in his footnotes might judge some of them severely and others indulgently;¹⁶ but the point for him as historian is that he has begun to describe, and will soon have to begin writing, a history one must travel in the imagination in order to understand. As his vivid and fairly accurate account of the city passes from the Aegean through the Hellespont, the Propontis and the Bosphorus, to the Euxine, the Roman empire begins to become exotic, even alien, to its readers. From the landscapes and seascapes of the Iliad and the Argonauts,¹⁷ Gibbon’s perception passes to the north and the east, Scythia, Persia and the unknown Orient, and there is to be a history of Roman empire in immediate interaction with these lands and their cultures. It will be the historiographic function of the new Rome to give this history a narrative form, separate from that descending from the old.

In the choice of an advantageous situation [Constantine] preferred the confines of Europe and Asia; to curb with a powerful arm the barbarians who dwelt between the Danube and the Tanais; to watch with an eye of jealousy the conduct of the Persian monarch, who indignantly supported the yoke of an ignominious treaty. With these views Diocletian had selected and embellished the residence of Nicomedia; but the memory of Diocletian was justly abhorred by the protector of the church;¹⁸

and it might be added that Nicomedia had been one of four capitals – Trier, Milan and Sirmium on the Danube frontier being the others – from which the Augusti and Caesares of Diocletian’s tetrarchy were to have guarded and controlled the empire. Constantine, who ‘was not insensible

¹⁵ Those in this category cited in Gibbon’s description of Constantinople are: Pierre Gilles (1490–1555); for references see Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1220, Richard Pocock (1704–65; p. 1252), George Sandys (1578–1644; p. 1259), Melchisedek Thévenot (1633–67; p. 1267), Joseph Pitton de Tournefort (1656–1708; p. 1269) and Robert Wood (1717–71; pp. 1275–76). Two of the six only were his contemporaries. He also employs the geographer D’Anville, an important figure in his modern reading (Womersley, 1994, III, pp. 1191–2; Abbatisa, 1997).

¹⁶ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 589 (on Sandys), 590 (Wood), 591, 596 (Pocock).

¹⁷ Gibbon thought it necessary, or amusing, to remind his readers of these associations; Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 587, 589–91.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 586. From this point I cite the *Decline and Fall (DF)* by volume and page number alone, except where reminders seem necessary.

to the ambition of founding a city which might perpetuate the glory of his own name',¹⁹ intended, or achieved, something different. By allowing his foundation the name of a 'new Rome', he changed the structure of empire and altered its culture. Like Nicomedia on the Propontis, Byzantium on the Bosphorus might look towards Persia rather than the north:

The preservation of the eastern provinces may, in some degree, be attributed to the policy of Constantine, as the barbarians of the Euxine, who in the preceding age had poured their armaments into the heart of the Mediterranean, soon desisted from the exercise of piracy, and despaired of forcing this insurmountable barrier.²⁰

Gibbon's cautious language shows that it was no longer a matter of preventing the flotillas of Black Sea Goths from entering the Aegean as they had in the preceding century.²¹ The landbound and migratory barbarians living between the Danube and the Don proved more likely, when set in motion, to ascend the valley of the former river and threaten the passes into Italy and the sources of the Rhine. The presence of the Balkan ranges between the Danube and the Bosphorus was both the strength and the weakness of the empire; it made Constantinople hard to attack by land but encouraged eastern emperors to leave the defence of the west to its regional commanders. Gibbon does not accept the charge that emperors in Constantinople necessarily abandoned the west to its fate, but he does think, as we shall see, that something of the sort may be said of the sons of Theodosius in the next century. What is beginning to take shape on his mental horizon in chapter 17 is the perception that an empire is being founded on the Bosphorus, whose history is not that of Decline and Fall as a western phenomenon, and cannot be included in the narratives used to explain the latter. He has begun to consider the history set going by Constantine as 'Byzantine', remote and unfamiliar, to be reached only by travellers in the imagination; as Yeats would say, one must 'sail the seas' to come to it. This again is why his description of it must be vivid and visual; it is also why he must now set about explaining how the imperial culture of new Rome came to be what it was, unlike that of old Rome and its successors in the west.

He presents Constantine's choice of a site as geopolitically maritime rather than limitanean – if that word may be coined to describe a choice of frontier strategies. 'The Bosphorus and the Hellespont may be considered as the two gates of Constantinople, and the prince who possessed those important passages could always shut them against a naval enemy and open them to the fleets of commerce.'²² When 'the passages of the Straights were thrown open for trade, they alternately admitted the natural

¹⁹ *Ibid.* ²⁰ I, p. 591. ²¹ *FDF*, p. 469. ²² I, pp. 591–2.

and artificial riches of the north and the south, of the Euxine and the Mediterranean . . . into the port of Constantinople, which, for many ages, attracted the commerce of the ancient world'.²³ The city was both an impregnable capital and a global emporium; but there was no prospect of its becoming a Venice or Amsterdam, ruled by a republican oligarchy of merchants. We are not in the world of Adam Smith, and 'the growth of Constantinople cannot be ascribed to the general increase of mankind and of industry'. Though we are not told exactly why, its commerce does not make it a civil society, or other than an 'artificial colony',²⁴ created at the will of a semi-oriental despot as a palace city and temple city of a new kind, whose origin and culture Gibbon must proceed to describe. Smith might have asked him – perhaps he did – why commerce failed to make the new Rome a phenomenon in the natural history of society, as we now ask why the history of liberal capitalism is not being repeated in China.

Gibbon supplies us with what might have been his answer. Constantine is a despot,²⁵ and the city is being created by his will alone. It is therefore artificial, and he must import all that is needed to make it a city, other than the unparalleled advantages of its site. He must fill it with works of art created in antiquity by those who had the freedom and virtue necessary to create them, and with a transplanted population of those who lack these qualities.

The master of the Roman world . . . could employ in the prosecution of that great work the wealth, the labour, and all that yet remained of the genius of obedient millions . . . but the impatience of Constantine soon discovered that in the decline of the arts, the skill as well as numbers of his architects bore a very unequal proportion to the greatness of his designs²⁶ . . . To revive the genius of Phidias and Lysippus surpassed indeed the power of a Roman emperor . . . it is not in the city of Constantine, nor in the declining period of an empire, when the human mind was depressed by civil and religious slavery, that we should seek the souls of Homer and Demosthenes.²⁷

It is a long way to the age of Justinian, when Gibbon will have to make up his mind about the architecture of Hagia Sophia; but he goes into detail about the imposing fabric of pillars, statues, baths and ruling-class housing. The question is for whom all this is intended, and part of the answer is that Constantine was obliged to import a population, who in the

²³ *Ibid.* ²⁴ I, p. 599. ²⁵ I, p. 596.

²⁶ Here Gibbon begins to cite the *Codex Theodosianus* (XII, iv, 1).

²⁷ I, pp. 595–6. Gibbon has turned from architecture to poetry; the new empire included a mandarin class skilled in letters already ancient. After the mention of Phidias, the visual arts are passed over.

absence of a labouring economy consisted largely of a *lumpenproletariat* like that of old Rome, fed by free corn imported from Egypt²⁸ and given to the violent support of sporting celebrities. We are in the decay of ancient virtue and have not yet replaced it by modern labour and productivity. The new city, however, has a purpose; it consists of palaces and barracks existing for the display and support of monarchy; and this monarchy is not purely ritual. As Gibbon wrote on another occasion,²⁹ it was designed for use rather than for ostentation. Administrative and of course clerical elites will assemble around the person of the monarch, and we face the question how far an urban economy can take shape around them.

Wherever the seat of government is fixed, a considerable part of the public revenue will be expended by the prince himself, by his ministers, by the officers of justice, and by the domestics of the palace. The most wealthy of the provincials will be attracted by the powerful motives of interest and duty, of amusement and curiosity. A third and more numerous class of inhabitants will insensibly be formed, of servants, of artificers, and of merchants, who derive their subsistence from their own labour, and from the wants or luxury of the superior ranks. In less than a century Constantinople disputed with Rome itself the pre-eminence of riches and numbers. New piles of buildings crowded together with too little regard for health or convenience, scarcely allowed the intervals of narrow streets for the perpetual throng of men, of horses, and of carriages.³⁰

Following though not resembling old Rome, Constantinople is to become a 'great wen' like London or Paris (or like Washington a service economy), held together by the consumer needs of its resident elites, rather than by its industry or commerce (though Gibbon has earlier emphasised its role as an emporium for world trade).³¹ The governing elites are what matter, and it is as Gibbon begins to tell us who and what these were in Constantinople that we begin to realise that both the sources of historical information and the historical narrative itself are changing from what they have so far been.

(III)

The foundation of a new capital is naturally connected with the establishment of a new form of civil and military administration.

²⁸ I, p. 600. Gibbon thinks exaggerated the claim of Zosimus, followed by Montesquieu (*Grandeur et Decadence des Romains*, ch. 17) that Italy was depopulated to build Constantinople, but agrees that the institution of a corn dole in the new city was a mistake.

²⁹ I, p. 195; a jest about the emperor Gordian in the third century. ³⁰ I, pp. 599–600.

³¹ I, p. 592. Does Gibbon ever enquire why a merchant class does not develop and seek power on the Bosphorus?

Here Gibbon inserts the sentence already quoted³² in which the new institutions earlier praised as giving ‘strength and stability’ to the empire become one of the causes of its ‘rapid decay’. He continues:

In the pursuit of any remarkable institution, we may be frequently led into the more early or the more recent times of the Roman history; but the proper limits of this enquiry will be included within a period of about one hundred and thirty years from the accession of Constantine to the publication of the Theodosian code, from which, as well as from the *Notitia* of the east and west, we derive the most copious and authentic information of the state of the empire. This variety of objects will suspend, for some time, the course of the narrative; but the interruption will be censured only by those readers who are insensible to the importance of laws and manners, while they peruse, with eager curiosity, the transient intrigues of a court, or the accidental event of a battle.³³

We are at a crucial moment in the history, not only of the Roman empire, but of the shaping of western historiography, and more immediately Gibbon’s construction of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. He was about to present five chapters introducing the empire of Constantine, as the first three chapters of volume I had introduced the empire of the Antonines, and like them presenting the problem of empire’s strength and decay. The later empire, though identified with Constantine, is described as having been initiated by Diocletian, and in his thirteenth chapter Gibbon had remarked that he would delay its full description until he reached the age of the later emperor.³⁴ He was now undertaking that task, and has told us that he found it exceptionally difficult,³⁵ principally because of the new system’s bureaucratic complexity. Diocletian had initiated three revolutions. He had abandoned Rome in favour of a chain of four imperial residences, two in the west and two in the east, thus, said Gibbon, preparing the way to the empire’s ultimate division into two; he had made the person of the emperor sacred and inaccessible on the Persian model; and by separating civil and military office and making all officials immediately responsible to him as *dominus* rather than *princeps*, he had begun the conversion of the empire into a bureaucracy.³⁶ By choosing Byzantium to replace Nicomedia, Constantine initiated a process by which an eastern capital became a centre of empire, but that was far from complete in the age of the *Codex* and the *Notitia*, when decrees were still issued by emperors from Trier, Milan or Sirmium; and Gibbon’s identification of the bureaucracy these texts describe with Constantinople and the empire we call ‘Byzantine’

³² Above, p. 16. ³³ I, pp. 602–3. ³⁴ I, p. 390. ³⁵ Above, p. 15, n. 6.

³⁶ I, pp. 387–8.

looks forward to a future history in which it would have vanished from the west.

The two texts Gibbon has named are historical events as well as documents; each is a step in the formation and formalisation of late imperial bureaucracy. The *Codex Theodosianus* was the most successful attempt to date – there had been predecessors – to bring together the decrees and laws pronounced by emperors from Constantine I to Theodosius II, under whom it was promulgated in the year 438. It is important to the history of both jurisprudence and historiography that this compilation was overtaken in the next century by the more ambitious Code, Digest and Pandects of the emperor Justinian. Confined to the acts of Christian emperors – Julian though apostate is considered legitimate – the *Codex* deals with ecclesiastical affairs as they appear in legislation, and – of equal importance to the history of historiography – has much to tell us about the social, commercial and even cultural practices which empire as a command economy endeavoured to regulate. It was this characteristic of Roman law that made it an agent in the early modern transformation of historiography. The *Codex* covers a period in which the empire was ruled sometimes by a single emperor, sometimes by associations on the Diocletianic model of Augusti and Caesares in collegiality or competition. Gibbon, intent on presenting Constantine's system of government as identical with his new-founded city, tends to depict the *Codex* entirely as preparatory to the division of the empire into east and west. The same may be said with greater emphasis of his treatment of the *Notitia Dignitatum*, a text which he dates a little earlier than the *Codex Theodosianus*.³⁷ This is an ambitious attempt – not the only one of its kind; two lesser *notitiae* appear with the *Codex* itself – to tabulate the entire range of offices, civil and military, held under the empire *in oriente* and *in occidente*, and these systems are perceived as distinct but not very different. It is important that both the *Codex* and the *Notitiae* treat *officia* as *dignitates*, spending much time – as did the framers of legislation – on their ritual significance, the honorific language used in addressing those who held them, and the elaborately codified systems of precedence among even those who had held them previously. This enables Gibbon to take a long stride towards depicting the later empire as a ritualised and sacralised monarchy served by a bureaucracy having the same characteristics. This is the governing culture we have come to describe as 'Byzantine'; one question is how far Gibbon means us to understand that it was this system which collapsed *in occidente*, so that its rise figures among the causes of the Decline and Fall.

³⁷ I, p. 603, n. 72.

He cites both texts in their early modern editions, the *Codex* as edited by Jacques Godefroy (1587–1652),³⁸ the *Notitia Dignitatum* as edited by Guido Panciroli (1523–99).³⁹ In the prolegomena to both we find the names of Andrea Alciati, Jean du Tillet and Jacques Cujas, giants of the chiefly French legal humanist scholarship which had converted historiography into the archaeology of past states of society and culture, as their law and language revealed them to have been.⁴⁰ Gibbon was well aware of this transformation; in his later autobiographies we find him remarking:

Among the books which I purchased, the Theodosian Code, with the commentary of James Godefroy, must be gratefully remembered. I used it (and much I used it) as a work of history rather than of Jurisprudence; but in every light it may be considered as a full and capacious repository of the political state of the Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries.⁴¹

Not only does the historian read law in another way than the lawyer;⁴² we have already seen Gibbon acknowledging, as had Dubos and Smith before him,⁴³ that this form of historical study might be unwelcome to the reader of histories, intent on the dramatic or exemplary narrative of political and military actions. We are at the first of the two linkages making up the three-term ‘Momiglianian model’ now employed in the study of the early modern history of historiography;⁴⁴ the moment, that is to say, of encounter between classical or neo-classical rhetorical narrative and neo-humanist or ‘Renaissance’ philological antiquarianism. But not only is this encounter not yet a synthesis; Momigliano himself began the construction of the model by situating Gibbon at the later juncture between antiquarianism and Enlightened philosophical history. This reading has been carried on with characteristic energy in the posthumously published essays of Hugh Trevor-Roper,⁴⁵ who tended to see the antiquarian as dry-as-dust when not enlightened by Montesquieuan philosophy. As the last quotation tells us, Gibbon saw matters rather differently; but the question is now what we are to make, at this point in the construction of the *Decline and Fall*, of Momigliano’s presentation of Gibbon as marking the second linkage in what we term his model. We have Gibbon’s account of his legal-antiquarian study of the last phase of Roman empire; will it generate, or otherwise be joined by, a philosophical metanarrative of how

³⁸ Godefroy, 1736–45, for references in this volume. Gibbon owned the Lyons edition of 1665 (*Library*, p. 264).

³⁹ Panciroli, 1593. ⁴⁰ Pocock, 1957/87; Kelley, 1970. ⁴¹ *A*, p. 285.

⁴² Harries and Wood, 1993, pp. 26 (Matthews: ‘Gibbon’s remark is welcome support for the historian’s rights of settlement in the territory of Jurisprudence’), 63 (Sirks: ‘of course historians have as much right to the Code as anyone else’).

⁴³ *NCG*, p. 325; below, pp. 468–70. ⁴⁴ Pocock, *NCG* and 2011.

⁴⁵ Trevor-Roper, 2010.

Constantine's new system led to the disruption of empire and its disintegration in the west? We must proceed to study what emerges in Gibbon's text from the use he made of the editions of Godefroy and Panciroli.

The little-known and perhaps low-ranking office-holders who compiled the *Codex* and *Notitia* had purposes not looking beyond the practical. They intended to collect the decrees and enactments of emperors since Constantine, determine which of them were of enduring force as laws – here of course there were decisions that had to be made⁴⁶ – arrange them under headings that defined their relevance (further decisions were called for here) and promulgate them as a general code for the guidance of magistrates and administrators. So much for the *Codex*; the authors of the several *notitiae* (of which that edited by Panciroli was thought the fullest and most authoritative) aimed to tabulate the holders of office, civil and military, east and west, and state the sphere of responsibility belonging to each, and perhaps more importantly the titles of dignity, the seniority and above all the system of precedence, that defined the imperial service as a culture of government. It can be argued that the codifiers were not jurists but bureaucrats; the *Codex Theodosianus* attempts no conflation of its contents with the works of Gaius, Ulpian or Papinian, and it was left to the much more ambitious Code, Digest and Pandects, assembled under Justinian in the sixth century, to attempt the creation of a system of 'Roman law' as this term came to be used. It was not until he had completed his history of the reign of Justinian, published in 1788, that Gibbon added his chapter on the history of Roman law, and we shall find it unclear how far the idea of such a history was in his mind between 1776 and 1781.

He read the *Codex* 'as a work of history rather than of jurisprudence', but it was not constructed as a work of the former kind (or perhaps of the latter). The laws it contains are dated and named as acts of the emperors then reigning and the consuls then holding titular office, and this is done as a means of giving them authority; but they are not arranged in chronological order⁴⁷ and do not attempt a history of Roman law or government. We may detect in them the presence of historical changes of which their authors and compilers were aware – the Christianisation of empire, its division into east and west, even the catastrophes overtaking the western empire – but none of these figure in anything that might be called a

⁴⁶ Harries and Wood, 1993, pp. 5–6 and generally.

⁴⁷ Godefroy, however, constructed a *Chronologia Nova Constitutionum* accompanied by a *Chronicon Historicum*, in which the laws are arranged under successive emperors and the annals of each reign interpolated; Godefroy, 1736, pp. i–cciv. The successive *tomi* of the Leipzig edition bear title pages dated from 1736 to 1745.

historical narrative, and history in this sense is scarcely implicit and never explicit; the writers may have known it was happening, but they had other things to do than recount it. When Gibbon used the words ‘a work of history’, he did not mean that the Theodosian Code was a history, but that it was an enormously rich store and source of historical information. To understand how the word ‘history’ came to be usable in this sense, we must move from the mental world of fifth-century Romans to that of sixteenth-century Europeans.

Godefroy and Panciroli were intent on the study of Roman law in its historical setting before turning to its value (which they did not deny) to the science of jurisprudence. They were indignant with Justinian and his minister Tribonian for their systematisation of the whole body of law in a sixth-century setting, which – together with the work of medieval glossators and post-glossators – had made it harder to understand as they wished; a criticism of moment in the history of western political thought.⁴⁸ Their re-historicisation of Roman law is of course part of what Gibbon meant by calling Godefroy’s edition a work of ‘history’; but it is probable that he attached greater weight to the wealth of information about late antique government and society which the study of law necessarily brought to light. Godefroy and Panciroli were historians – or rather, actors in the history of historiography – in the sense that they were antiquarians, scholars interested in the sheer detail and miscellaneousness of information before it was incorporated in jurisprudence, philosophy or historical narrative.⁴⁹ Those for whom the value of information lies in its contributions to explanatory narrative continue – as they did then – to use ‘antiquarian’ as a term of dispraise; but knowledge which is valued for its own sake precedes its modes of systematisation and may lead to the discovery of new ones. There is therefore an open relationship between what Godefroy and Panciroli were doing and what Gibbon did with the knowledge they made available to him.

The sixteenth-century editors were not incapable of supposing historical change – Godefroy speaks of the *mutata reipublicae forma* from the time of Constantine⁵⁰ – but though they obviously knew that there had been an end of the western empire, they were not obliged to relate its course or identify its causes. Gibbon, however, was committed to describing Constantine’s system of government and connecting it in some way with the fall of empire, and had identified the *Codex* and the *Notitia* so closely with that system that he must employ them in searching for causes of its decay. Since neither the texts nor the editors had stated these causes, he

⁴⁸ Pocock, 1957–87; Kelley, 1970. ⁴⁹ Momigliano, 1955; Miller, 2000, 2008.

⁵⁰ Godefroy, 1745; *tom. VI, pars II, A2*.

must say what they were and justify himself from the editions before him. He proceeds to identify four fields of study: the growth of bureaucracy, the spread of law, the weakening of the armies, and the weight of taxation; and he employs the *Codex* and *Notitia* in what he has to say about them. He is, however, constructing narratives not directly stated by Godefroy or Panciroli.

He begins his analysis of Constantine's 'new policy' in the following terms.

The manly pride of the Romans, content with substantial power, had left to the vanity of the east the forms and ceremonies of ostentatious greatness. But when they lost even the semblance of those virtues which were derived from their ancient freedom, the simplicity of Roman manners was insensibly corrupted by the stately affectation of the courts of Asia. The distinctions of personal merit and influence, so conspicuous in a republic, so feeble and obscure under a monarchy, were abolished by the despotism of the emperors, who substituted in their room a severe subordination of rank and office, from the titled slaves who were seated on the steps of the throne, to the meanest instruments of arbitrary power. This multitude of abject dependents was interested in the support of the actual government, from the dread of a revolution, which might at once confound their hopes, and intercept the reward of their services. In this divine hierarchy (for such it is frequently styled) every rank was marked with the most scrupulous exactness, and its dignity was displayed in a variety of trifling and solemn ceremonies, which it was a study to learn, and a sacrilege to neglect. The purity of the Latin language was debased, by adopting, in the intercourse of pride and flattery, a profusion of epithets, which Tully would scarcely have understood, and which Augustus would have rejected with indignation. The principal officers of the empire were saluted, even by the sovereign himself, with the deceitful titles of your *Sincerity*, your *Gravity*, your *Excellency*, your *Eminence*, your *sublime and wonderful Magnitude*, your *illustrious and magnificent Highness* . . . and every circumstance of their demeanour, their dress, their ornaments, and their train, was calculated to inspire a deep reverence for the representatives of supreme majesty. By a philosophic observer, the system of the Roman government might have been mistaken for a splendid theatre, filled with players of every character and degree, who repeated the language, and imitated the passions of their original model.⁵¹

This portrayal may accurately be termed 'orientalist', and might also be called 'Byzantinist'. A modern (i.e. post-Gibbonian) reader recognises at once the conventional portrait of the emperor's court at Constantinople, a description that may be reiterated at any point in east Roman history. The 'titled slaves seated on the steps of the throne' call up the vision of a palace monarchy, where a secluded and ritualised monarch – originally imposed on the Roman world by Diocletian⁵² – is surrounded by a ritualised and

⁵¹ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 603–4. ⁵² I, pp. 388–9; *FDF*, pp. 479–80.

sacralised bureaucracy,⁵³ and may be as much their slave as they are his. When we look a second time at this passage, however, further levels of meaning begin to appear. Gibbon is taking his departure from the image of republican *virtù* – the capacity to rule that comes only with freedom – and taking only one step from it to arrive at the image of oriental despotism. The superb metaphor with which he concludes – government as a theatre in which rule is impersonated rather than enacted – may remind us of the incident when the citizens of Antioch were watching a play and the actors were the first to notice the advent of a Persian army.⁵⁴ It is also a source for Peter Brown's observation that a theme in Gibbon's history is the steady 'leakage of reality'.⁵⁵ But the reader may call to mind the passage in chapter 13 which contrasts the 'hypocrisy' of the Augustan principate, where the ruler plays the role of a republican magistrate in public while ruling as a despot in the palace, with the ritualised performance of the oriental despot who can be no more than the role which he plays, and concludes that the hypocrite is the more 'manly' of the two.⁵⁶ In contrasting the Byzantine emperor directly with the republican consul, Gibbon is telescoping the history of the principate; Marcus Aurelius is no more than a step on the road from Brutus to Constantine.

It is apposite to recall two moments in the autobiographies: one at which Gibbon recounts how he discovered by accident a post-Constantinian history of which his schoolboy reading had told him nothing,⁵⁷ the other, already cited, when he tells us how he found the study of Constantinian government difficult to write.⁵⁸ The need to connect directly with a remote republican ideal shows him almost imprisoned within what Michel Baridon called his *whiggisme polybienne*, and shows also that his account of the 'new policy' is a little one-dimensional. His 'divine hierarchy' and 'splendid theatre' seem to exist 'on the steps of a throne' stationary on the site of Byzantium, whereas the *Codex* shows the laws and decrees as issuing from emperors constantly in motion, and as dated from capitals from Trier to Constantinople, wherever the ruler and his officials might happen to be; and we wonder whether this ritualised hierarchy was peripatetically in attendance on him. Gibbon's account of this bureaucracy, furthermore, is based on the several *notitiae dignitatum* – Godefroy's

⁵³ For the remark (above) that it was 'sacrilege' to be ignorant of the ceremonies of precedence, see *Decline and Fall* (DF), I, ch. 17, n. 74. The *Codex* regularly refers to the emperors as *divi*, leaving it unclear how far this title is to be read in a Christian sense.

⁵⁴ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 284; Ammianus Marcellinus, 23.5.3; Rolfe, 1939/1986, II, pp. 334–5.

⁵⁵ Brown, 1977b, p. 78. ⁵⁶ FDF, p. 480. ⁵⁷ EEG, pp. 28–38. ⁵⁸ Above, p. 15, n. 6

as well as Panciroli's⁵⁹ – and these describe an immense structure of offices, civil and military, domestic and provincial, in the western empire and in the east. To portray it as a ritualised palace phenomenon, as Gibbon seems to be doing, is to say the least selective. He will a few pages later describe it as the imperial administration it was, leaving the passage quoted an isolated display of rhetoric.

Gibbon's account of the hierarchical magniloquence, and to him absurdity, of late imperial bureaucratic formalisation is of course based on the two texts he has before him. Both editors found it necessary to distinguish between the pompously entitled ranks, *illustres*, *spectabiles*, *clarissimi* – even *perfectissimi* and *egregii*, whom Gibbon considered beneath attention – into which the *dignitates* were divided, and to tabulate the innumerable modes of address he found so offensive.⁶⁰ Neither, however, commented on this language as a sign of degeneration or as a phenomenon marking historical change. Godefroy devotes much space to the elaborate system of precedence that obtained among present and even former holders of the various offices,⁶¹ but cannot be said to describe it as marking the creation of a new governing class or culture; his interest in it is more antiquarian than historical.⁶² Recent historians see late antique bureaucracy as replacing an Antonine or Augustan governing culture in which local elites maintained their position by voluntary benefactions or the performance of administrative functions;⁶³ but though Gibbon in his earliest chapters gave attention to this mode of governance,⁶⁴ he does not isolate the growth of bureaucracy as replacing it with a new ruling class. As we move from the rhetoric of despotism and servility, however, we encounter a more substantial account of Constantinian government, in which a contrast with the earlier empire does appear.

(IV)

Once again Gibbon takes his departure from the shadow of the republic. He describes how the consuls, who formerly derived both civil and military authority from the free choice of the people, became under the late empire

⁵⁹ A full-length *notitia dignitatum* occupies Book VI of the *Codex*; Godefroy, 1737, *tom.* II, pp. 1–246. A supplement under the same title was appended to the *Codex* by Godefroy, 1745, *tom.* VI, *pars* II, pp. 1–34. That of Panciroli, 1593, is altogether distinct.

⁶⁰ See in particular *Codex*, book VI, chs. VI and XXII, part of the *notitia dignitatum* used by Godefroy, and Panciroli 1593, sig. 5v–6.

⁶¹ Panciroli 1593, sig. A.

⁶² See, however, his remark (*tom.* II, p. 72): *alia est meritum et sic repetitae dignitatus ratio, quam Ethica sequitur, alia dignitatus ipsius, quam Politica.*

⁶³ Brown, 1971, remains an admirable account of this process.

⁶⁴ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 72–4.

purely ritual figures who ‘retire into the shade of private life’, to ‘enjoy . . . the undisturbed contemplation of their own greatness’,⁶⁵ giving their names to the year, however, and playing a role sacred enough to be assumed occasionally by the Augusti and Caesares reigning as emperors. The order of patricians, similarly, had insisted on their absolute separation from the plebeians ‘in the first age of the Roman republic’,⁶⁶ but by the time of Constantine had so far disappeared that their name was no more than an occasional honorific. Gibbon here makes the Montesquieuan remark:

To form a body of nobles, whose influence may restrain where it secures the authority of the monarch, would have been very inconsistent with the character and policy of Constantine; but, had he seriously entertained such a design, it might have exceeded the measure of his power to ratify by an arbitrary edict an institution which must expect the sanction of time and of opinion.⁶⁷

A hereditary nobility is not absolutely (though very nearly) unthinkable in a republic; and even in a monarchy – Gibbon would here have been thinking of a modern monarchy rather than an ancient⁶⁸ – noblemen may be capable of virtue as well as honour; they may be thinking of the *res publica* as well as their own *dignitas* within it. The aim of the *Notitia Dignitatum*, however, is to replace both nobles and citizens with a regime of government servants; on the other hand, the elaborate ceremonies designed to provide them with dignity and sacrality are enough to prove that only a neo-roman⁶⁹ rhetoric can describe them as slaves. The actors in the splendid theatre exercise real powers, both civil and military; and Gibbon embarks on a complex history designed to show how these powers were separated and redistributed.

This history is not that of the consuls, but of the praetorian prefects, who

rising by degrees from the most humble condition, were invested with the civil and military administration of the Roman world. From the reign of Severus to that of Diocletian –

we at last catch sight of a historical process that will link Gibbon’s first volume with his second –

the guards and the palace, the laws and the finances, the armies and the provinces, were intrusted to their superintending care; and like the vizirs of the East –

⁶⁵ p. 607. ⁶⁶ pp. 607–8. ⁶⁷ p. 609.

⁶⁸ His remark (p. 27, above) that ‘distinctions of personal merit’ are ‘feeble and obscure under a monarchy’ probably applies to the Rome of Tarquin or Tiberius, rather than to the parliamentary monarchy of George III. Whether he would have agreed that the latter was a crowned republic is less clear.

⁶⁹ I of course borrow this word from Quentin Skinner.

the Orient recurs –

they held with one hand the seal, and with the other the standard, of the empire.

Their power ultimately rested on the praetorian guards, key actors in every succession crisis of the Augustan principate.

But, after those haughty troops had been weakened by Diocletian and finally suppressed by Constantine, the praefects, who survived their fall, were reduced without difficulty to the station of useful and obedient ministers . . . They were deprived by Constantine of all military command . . . and, at length, by a singular revolution, the captains of the guards were transformed into the civil magistrates of the provinces.⁷⁰

We have reached the heart of the Constantinian revolution: the separation of the civil and military authority which was conferred undivided by the free people of the republic, and without which, so conferred, it was possible that no republic could exist. Gibbon proceeds – with Zosimus in hand to guide him through ‘the copious details of the *Code* and the circumstantial minuteness of the *Notitia*’⁷¹ – to expound the civil governments of the late empire, divided into four great provincial prefectures and the urban prefectures of Roman and Constantinople. (It is no accident that a digression and footnote recount how the Roman office had been declined by the virtuous Messala, who endeavoured to serve Augustus without sacrificing republican liberty.⁷²) The innumerable district offices subordinate to the four prefectures are summarised from the detail supplied by the master texts, and Gibbon contrives within a confined space to say both that

as the spirit of jealousy and ostentation prevailed in the councils of the emperors, they proceeded with anxious diligence to divide the substance and to multiply the titles of power⁷³

and

The ponderous volumes of the Codes and Pandects would furnish ample materials for a minute enquiry into the system of provincial government, as in the space of six centuries it was improved by the wisdom of the Roman statesmen and lawyers. It may be sufficient for the historian to select the singular and salutary provisions, intended to restrain the abuse of authority.⁷⁴

The despot’s anxiety to diminish the independence of his subordinates leads him to introduce the separation of powers and the checks and

⁷⁰ For the whole passage, Womersley, 1994, I, p. 609.

⁷¹ *DF*, I, ch. 17, n. 99; Womersley, 1994, I, p. 610.

⁷² pp. 610–11 and n. 104. This Plutarchan worthy appears in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*.

⁷³ p. 614. ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

balances by which they set limits to one another, so necessary to the liberty of the subject under law. But if law is even to a limited extent the child of the despotism it may (like Montesquieu's nobilities) succeed in restraining and securing, the philosopher's attitude towards it must remain somewhat ambiguous. Gibbon tells us that

The celebrated Institutes of Justinian are addressed to the youth of his dominions who had devoted themselves to the study of Roman jurisprudence; and the sovereign condescends to animate their diligence by the assurance that their skill and ability would in time be rewarded by an adequate share in the government of the republic . . . Nor could they want an inexhaustible supply of business in a great empire already corrupted by the multiplicity of laws, of arts, and of vices . . . The honour of a liberal profession has indeed been vindicated by ancient and modern advocates, who have filled the most important stations with pure integrity and consummate wisdom; but in the decline of Roman jurisprudence the ordinary promotion of lawyers was pregnant with mischief and disgrace. The noble art, which had once been preserved as the sacred inheritance of the patricians –

the republican nobility once again –

was fallen into the hands of freedmen and plebeians, who, with cunning rather than with skill, exercised a sordid and pernicious trade.⁷⁵

There follows the usual invective against advocates, pettifoggers and trial lawyers, which recurs little changed in all law-governed societies. Gibbon does not mention that the Theodosian Code was promulgated in the hope that codification would prevent chicanery,⁷⁶ but we have no difficulty imagining what his comment would have been. The aim of law was to multiply offices in the interest of the sovereign, and that was the secret of Constantine's new policy.

The separation and weakening of office, which Gibbon presents as the secret of policy, leaves it unclear how far we are to think of the *dignitates* set forth in the *Notitia* as the mere theatricality of slaves on the steps of the throne, and how far as effective offices exercising real government, and investing their holders with real power that the emperor may fear. Nowhere is this more clear than when Gibbon comes to the separation of civil from military office, which revolutionised the role of the prefects. As these and their subordinates are listed, there appears alongside them a tabulation of military *dignitates*, headed by *magistri militum*, who may be divided into *magistri peditum* and *equitum* and into holders of these commands *in oriente* and *occidente*. Gibbon leaves no doubt that this marks a revolutionary change from the system inherited from the republic by the Augustan principate.

⁷⁵ pp. 616–17. ⁷⁶ Godefroy, *tom. I* (1736), *Prolegomena*, p. ccxiii.

The influence of the revenue, the authority of law, and the command of a military force, concurred to render [the] power [of provincial governors] supreme and absolute; and whenever they were tempted to violate their allegiance, the loyal province which they involved in their rebellion was scarcely sensible of any change in its political state.

This is the Tacitean discovery that emperors could be made *alibi quam Romae*, the governing theme of Gibbon's first volume and (*magni nominis umbra*) this series' second.

From the time of Commodus to the reign of Constantine near one hundred governors might be innumeraled, who, with various success, erected the standard of revolt; and though the innocent were too often sacrificed, the guilty might be sometimes prevented, by the suspicious cruelty of their master. To secure his throne and the public tranquillity from these formidable servants, Constantine resolved to divide the military from the civil administration, and to establish, as a permanent and professional distinction, a practice which had been adopted only as an occasional expedient.⁷⁷

The world of Tacitus and the *Historia Augusta* does not vanish at a blow; provincial governors like Magnentius and Maximus⁷⁸ will continue to claim the purple at moments of uncertain succession; but we have arrived at a moment of revolutionary change, and it is about to become a question whether the new system will deal adequately with external threats.

About the same time that Constantine gave a legal sanction to the ecclesiastical order –

how much meaning are we to read into this coincidence?

he instituted in the Roman empire the nice balance of the civil and the military powers. The emulation, and sometimes the discord, which reigned between two professions of opposite interests and incompatible manners –

there is far more to this than the rise of an orientalised bureaucracy –

was productive of beneficial and of pernicious consequences. It was seldom to be expected that the general and the civil governor of a province should either conspire for the disturbance, or should unite for the service, of their country. While the one delayed to offer the assistance which the other disdained to solicit, the troops very frequently remained without orders or without supplies, the public safety was betrayed, and the defenceless subjects were left exposed to the fury of the barbarians. The divided administration, which had been formed by

⁷⁷ p. 618.

⁷⁸ Magnentius, rebel against Constantius at the death of Constans, Womersley, 1994 I, pp. 672–83. Maximus, rebel against Theodosius when Gratian succeeds Valentinian I, II, pp. 22–49. See below, pp. 53–55, 281–82.

Constantine, relaxed the vigour of the state, while it secured the tranquillity of the monarch.⁷⁹

The division of civil from military power, originating when the *imperatores* partly superseded the *senatus populusque*, remains the ‘secret poison’ of the empire; but Gibbon is looking direct from the establishment of a ‘new policy’ at Constantinople to its failure to keep control of the western provinces in the next century. No problem in Roman history has been more heatedly debated in recent historiography than that of how this failure occurred and in what terms it is to be described, and from the words just quoted Gibbon goes on without a break to the assertion most controversial of all he has to say about the failure of empire.

The memory of Constantine has been deservedly censured for another innovation which corrupted military discipline, and prepared the ruin of the empire. The nineteen years which preceded his victory over Licinius had been a period of licence and intestine war. The rivals who contended for the possession of the Roman world had withdrawn the greatest part of their forces from the guard of the general frontier; and the principal cities which formed the boundary of their respective dominions were filled with soldiers, who considered their countrymen as their most implacable enemies. After the use of these internal garrisons had ceased with the civil war, the conqueror wanted either wisdom or firmness to revive the severe discipline of Diocletian, and to suppress a fatal indulgence which habit had endeared and almost confined to the military order. From the reign of Constantine a popular and even legal distinction was admitted between the *Palatines* and the *Borderers*; the troops of the court, as they were improperly styled, and the troops of the frontiers.⁸⁰

And Gibbon proceeds, in terms drawn from the rhetoric of historians rather than the documents before him, to describe how the former became degenerate and effeminate as a result of urban living – much like the janissaries in the Ottoman empire – while the latter were demoralised by their second-class status.

It was in vain that Constantine repeated the most dreadful menaces of fire and sword against the Borderers who should dare to desert their colours, to connive at the inroads of the barbarians, or to participate in the spoil. The mischiefs which flow from injudicious counsels are seldom removed by the application of partial severities: and though succeeding princes laboured to restore the strength and numbers of the frontier garrison, the empire, till the last moments of its dissolution, continued to languish under the mortal wound which had been so rashly or so weakly inflicted by the hand of Constantine.⁸¹

Among the various causes which Gibbon from time to time gives as explaining the Decline and Fall, few are as unequivocally and emphatically

⁷⁹ p. 619. ⁸⁰ pp. 619–20. ⁸¹ pp. 620–1.

stated as this, but few have brought down more criticism upon him. It has been repeatedly and rightly argued that he failed or refused to understand the division of the Roman army into three forces: the *limitanei* or border garrisons, the *comitatenses* and *pseudocomitatenses* or strategic reserve, and the *palatini* or imperial guards. He acknowledged only two of the three, but the distinctions can be learned from the texts before him, as he almost recognises in a footnote that runs:

Zosimus, l.ii, p. 111. The distinction between the two classes of Roman troops is very darkly expressed in the historians, the laws, and the Notitia. Consult, however, the copious *paratilon* or abstract, which Godefroy has drawn up, of the seventh book, de Re militari, of the Theodosian Code⁸²

and in which Godefroy had in fact remarked:

Usum rei militaris, seu armatae militiae, hac tempestate triplicem reperio: Vel enim usus fuit, adversus Barbaros, hostesque Imperii Romani . . . Vel adversus Tyrannos et hostes publicos . . . Vel adversus Latrones quosdam coniuratos, quos et armis quandoque persequi oportuit . . . in duos veluti Classes milites diuisi erant: quarum Prima classis, eaque potior et dignior . . . complectabant Palatinos et Comitatusenses.⁸³

[The purposes of an army, or a militia, in this period I find to have been threefold: against barbarians and enemies of the empire; against usurpers and enemies of the republic; and against gangs of bandits whom it was sometimes necessary to pursue in arms. The soldiers were divided into two classes, of which the first, the stronger and superior, included the *palatini* and the *comitatenses*.⁸⁴]

Gibbon here indicated guidelines he did not follow, and it is a question where he found his images of degeneracy. The *Codex* does contain Constantine's denunciation of desertion and treachery among the *limitanei*; but the picturesque details of effeminacy Gibbon gives in another footnote⁸⁵ come from a single passage in Ammianus Marcellinus regarding household regiments disbanded by the emperor Julian, and it was from Ammianus that he could have learned – and indeed did learn – that the armies of Constantius and Julian, like those of Theodosius and Stilicho after them, were able to march great distances and wage major actions, and could not be defeated – as they sometimes disastrously were – without some very hard fighting. He was relying on rhetoric rather than on sources, and a key to the passage above is its initial reference to Zosimus, a historian Gibbon despised but used.⁸⁶ Writing about 500, Zosimus saw

⁸² Ch. 17, n. 128; I, p. 620. ⁸³ Godefroy, *tom. II* (1737), p. 248. ⁸⁴ Trans. JGAP.

⁸⁵ Ch. 17, n. 129 (I, p. 620) with reference to Ammianus, 22.4.6: Rolfe, 1939/1986, I, pp. 198–9.

⁸⁶ Womersley, 1994, III, pp. 1276–77.

himself as the successor to Polybius, narrating a loss of empire as vast and rapid as the conquests recorded by the earlier historian, for which as a pagan he was resolved to hold Constantine to blame. Gibbon thought him as biased and credulous as his Christian opponents, but follows him exactly and interestingly in connecting the separation of civil and military authority with the degeneracy of the armies. An English translation of 1684 conveys by its raciness the quality of Zosimus's mind.

Now that this was a great Damage to the publick Affairs both in Peace and War, I'll prove immediately. For whiles the Prefects gather'd the Tributes in all places by their Ministers and laid them out in Warlike expences, having the Soldiers also in subjection, who suffer'd for offences according to their discretion, it's very probable the Soldiers who consider'd that the same person who gave them their pay, inflicted their punishment too whenever they offended, durst not do contrary to their Duty, out of fear, partly, lest their allowance should be taken off, and partly of present correction. But now since one is Paymaster, and another to look after their Discipline, they do what they please; not to say, that the greatest part of the Corn or other provisions goes into the General's or his Servants Pockets.

But besides this *Constantine* did another thing too, that gave the *Barbarians* a free passage into the *Roman* Dominions. For whereas the *Roman* Empire, by the care of *Diocletian* was fortified (as I told you) in the most remote parts of it with Towns and Castles and Forts, where the Soldiers lived, and consequently it was impossible for the *Barbarians* to pass, because there was always a sufficient number of Enemies to withstand 'em; *Constantine* destroy'd that Security, by removing the greater part of the Soldiers out of these Frontier Places, and putting them in Towns that wanted no assistance. For he strip'd them whom the Barbarians oppressed of all defence, and plagu'd the Towns that were quiet with a multitude of Soldiers, insomuch that some were quite forsaken of their Inhabitants. He likewise caused his Soldiers to grow effeminate by giving themselves to publick Shows and Pleasures. And to tell you plainly, he was the first cause, why things were brought into that miserable state they now are in.⁸⁷

Zosimus's argument is closely paralleled by Gibbon's. Some will find a sufficient explanation of this in the coincidence of Gibbon's scepticism with Zosimus's paganism; there is an obsessive desire among historians to make the rise of Christianity Gibbon's sole explanation of the Decline and Fall and the key to his treatment of Constantine. An alternative, which does more to illuminate the text of chapter 17 as we have it, may be found by considering Zosimus's evocation of Polybius as his forerunner and antithesis. In the first chapter of the *Decline and Fall*, which makes the empire of the Antonines the point of departure of the whole narrative, Gibbon had drawn from Polybius and his modern commentators a description of the formidable infantry of the legions, while reminding his

⁸⁷ Zosimus, 1684, pp. 115–17. For a modern translation see Ridley 1982/2006, p. 39.

readers that these had changed in tactics and organisation by the time of Julius Caesar, and that the late antique author Vegetius had really described the armies of Hadrian and the Antonines. He had added – unrecognised by some of his modern critics – that the role of cavalry had increased ‘under the lower empire, and in the times of chivalry’;⁸⁸ a significant forward glance from the moment when, as we have seen, the *magistri militum* might be *magistri peditum vel equitum*. Gibbon was never unaware of change, but was capable of telescoping its history. From the portrayal of legionary degeneracy under Constantine and his successors, he goes on to accuse the latter of following the policy of divide and rule by weakening the legions, so that the structure

to which they partly owed their valour and discipline, was dissolved by Constantine . . . And not a vestige was left of that severe simplicity which, in the ages of freedom and victory, had distinguished the line of battle of a Roman army from the confused host of an Asiatic monarch.⁸⁹

Once again, we move towards the Orient from an original Polybian moment of republican virtue, as we did when the splendid theatre of the *Notitia Dignitatum* was contrasted with the severe competence of republican magistrates. As Gibbon’s chapter 1 had made clear,⁹⁰ the legions described by Polybius had been composed of citizens; but they had always begun the conquests which would reduce them to the land-hungry stormtroopers of provincial governors turned warlord *imperatores*. Under Augustus’s *gouvernement ambigu*,⁹¹ the separation of military from civil virtue had begun; the soldiers, no longer citizens of a republic, had retained the discipline and tactics which equipped them to guard an empire, but had remained the instruments of provincial governors tempted to make themselves emperors *alibi quam Romae*. Diocletian had begun, and Constantine was now completing, the separation of military from civil office intended to reduce both to the obedient service of the state; but it was a question, recognised by Zosimus no less than by Gibbon, whether this could be done without weakening the military virtue of the legions themselves. The disappearance of a free citizenry who fought for themselves had been followed by the system of military colonisation encouraged by Augustus, and the *Codex* could be cited as showing how the later emperors first forced, and then failed to force, the sons of veterans to follow their fathers into the armies.⁹² As it became harder to recruit subjects from even the frontier provinces of Gaul and Illyria,

⁸⁸ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 41 and n. 43. ⁸⁹ p. 622.

⁹⁰ pp. 38–9. *FDF*, *passim*; the controlling theme of the volume. ⁹¹ *FDF*, pp. 353–4.

⁹² *Codex*, book VII, tit. XX, XXII.

the introduction of barbarians into the Roman armies became every day more universal, more necessary, and more fatal.⁹³

We encounter Decline and Fall in its ultimate sense. Gibbon knows well enough that the loss of the western provinces was less a matter of conquests by invading barbarians than of takeovers by barbarians in the Roman service but no longer obedient to its emperors. The control of provincial generals was a problem changing but unsolved from the days of Pompey and Caesar to those of Theodoric and Clovis. How far the orientalised eastern empire – Gibbon goes on to study the growth of the *domestici*, the chamberlains and eunuchs surrounding the person of the emperor⁹⁴ – contributed to the western catastrophe is a problem secondary to what Gibbon has ultimately to say: that we are studying the disappearance from Mediterranean culture of republican virtue. The separation of values is the final secret.

But as these hardy veterans, who had been educated in the ignorance or contempt of the laws, were incapable of exercising any civil offices, the powers of the human mind were contracted by the irreconcilable separation of talents as well as professions. The accomplished citizens of the Greek and Roman republics, whose characters could adapt themselves to the bar, the senate, the camp, or the schools, had learned to write, to speak, and to act with the same spirit, and with equal abilities.⁹⁵

Did Gibbon expect to see this union of freedom with versatility restored in modern Europe or America?

(V)

An English translation of the Theodosian Code, published at Princeton in 1952,⁹⁶ was much indebted to C. Dickerman Williams, of the New York Bar, who contributed both generous financial aid and an introduction, whose language closely resembles that of an outline of Roman history accompanying it. Williams saw the failure of empire in the west as that of a command economy, obliged to maintain such unproductive classes as the army, the bureaucracy and the professors of rhetoric⁹⁷ by imposing serfdom on agricultural producers and compulsory (often hereditary) state

⁹³ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 623. ⁹⁴ pp. 625, 30.

⁹⁵ pp. 624–5. Ramsay MacMullen gives a fascinating account (excerpted in Kagan, 1978, pp. 114–31) of *limitanei* engaging in trade and hiring out as tax-gatherers, and of *palatini* and *clarissimi* engaging in cultural exchange so that bureaucrats assume military ranks and uniforms. This is not a reversion to republican versatility, but the breakdown of a specialisation despotically imposed.

⁹⁶ Pharr, 1952. ⁹⁷ *Codex*, book XIII, laws 3–4. Pharr, 1952, p. xviii.

services on the urban *curiales* and craftsmen. This 'decadent Leviathan', he wrote, 'succumbed to . . . disorganised tribes of Germans', and Gibbon's 'triumph of barbarism and religion . . . is valid only as a designation of succession'.⁹⁸

Thus fell the Roman Empire of the West. Many other causes materially contributed to its final disintegration and to the triumph of the barbarians, but the most important single cause was unquestionably the hopeless misery of the regimented masses, with the attendant economic collapse that resulted from the excessive taxation that was necessary to support the corrupt bureaucracy of the socialized State.⁹⁹

And Williams put his own name to the conclusion of the introduction that assigns the Code to 'that period in classic civilization during which the organization of society most resembles that towards which we ourselves are now moving'.¹⁰⁰ Published under the Truman administration, these words suggest that dread of socialism to which Americans are apt to succumb when none pursueth. Gibbon, though a friend of Adam Smith and a keen reader of the *Wealth of Nations* (published in 1776), of course never heard of socialism and had no occasion to defend the free against the managed economy. He does, however, give in chapter 17 an account of the financial machinery of the Constantinian empire not unlike Williams's and based like it largely on the evidence of the Theodosian Code, but employing a concept of despotism rather than socialism (Williams no doubt regarded the terms as interchangeable).

This takes its departure from the growth of what was really a third category of *dignitates*, the *domestici* or officers attendant on the person of the prince. There is of course the usual spectre of the chamberlains, eunuchs and the other parasites of palace government, who may come between the prince and his empire – the essence of oriental despotism¹⁰¹ – but we very soon learn that the household is a centre of civil and military administration. The emperor has his guards, made up of Armenian warriors whose 'lofty stature, silent order, and . . . martial pomp not unworthy of the Roman majesty'¹⁰² suggest to us the Varangians of medieval Byzantium or the Swiss guards of the Vatican. More importantly, the imperial household administers vast estates, treasuries, mines and many factories 'for the service of the state' and 'the use of the palace and the army'.¹⁰³ 'The perpetual intercourse between the courts and the provinces was facilitated by the construction of roads and the institution of ports' – in which Gibbon had been interested since his researches of the 1760s.¹⁰⁴ 'But these beneficial establishments were accidentally

⁹⁸ Pharr, 1952, p. xxii.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. xxiv–xxv.

¹⁰⁰ p. xxii.

¹⁰¹ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 625.

¹⁰² pp. 629–30.

¹⁰³ p. 628.

¹⁰⁴ *EEG*, pp. 265–72.

connected with a pernicious and intolerable abuse';¹⁰⁵ Gibbon draws upon both the *Codex* and the *Notitia* to describe the *agentes in rebus*, originally the messengers of government and supervisors of the imperial estates, who developed into a security service and intelligence corps with the usual tyrannous consequences. Since Herodotus it had been known that a stationary ruler needed this kind of information; even Elizabeth I of England wore a gown embroidered with eyes and ears; but here it is the management of estates throughout the empire which is leading to a government by secrecy and terror.

After several paragraphs on the spread of torture,¹⁰⁶ however, Gibbon remarks that the subjects, unlike the elites, of an empire have less to fear from tyranny than from taxation. Montesquieu has suggested that the increase of taxes naturally accompanies the growth of freedom, but the late empire seems to have carried both taxation and despotism to simultaneous extremes.¹⁰⁷ This observation introduces the concluding pages of chapter 17, which examine the political economy of taxation under the despotism of post-Diocletian empire and contrasts it with the absolute monarchy of eighteenth-century France. An army of surveyors assess the lands, slaves and cattle of proprietors, and the *curiales* or *decuriones* are made answerable in person and in pocket for conveying the real produce or its assessed cash value to the use of government. There ensues a flight of the free from public office and of the servile from the cultivation and even the habitation of land; a vast acreage of otherwise fertile Campania has become desert. This thesis has become a predominant explanation of the Decline and Fall (though it has recently been challenged).¹⁰⁸ Gibbon does not say expressly, as Williams certainly does, that this disastrous system renders the empire incapable of maintaining armies; but he may certainly be read as connecting a death of civic virtue, due to despotic over-taxation, with the advent of barbarian mercenaries who first live off the land by looting it and then occupy it themselves. This, however, has to be read into the text of chapter 17, as it is easy for us to do. Gibbon is immediately concerned to say that the emperors were driven to forgive taxes they were unable to collect;¹⁰⁹ but he begins to make a modern reading possible by contrasting Roman taxation with the procedures of contemporary France. He conducted enquiries into them during 1777, when he spent six months in Paris as the guest of Jacques and Suzanne Necker, and the results survive in a notebook now published among his minor works.¹¹⁰ In chapter 17 he compares Roman Gaul with Bourbon France – now entering the prolonged financial and

¹⁰⁵ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 630. ¹⁰⁶ pp. 630–2. ¹⁰⁷ pp. 632–3.

¹⁰⁸ pp. 635–6. Heather, 2005, pp. 110–19. ¹⁰⁹ p. 635. ¹¹⁰ *EE*, pp. 212–25.

constitutional crisis which led to revolution twelve years later – and observes that ‘the absolute monarch of an industrious, wealthy, and affectionate people’¹¹¹ can collect taxes beyond the reach of a Roman emperor without reducing his subjects to banditry or serfdom. The crisis of French monarchy he did not foresee.

In a country where personal freedom is the privilege of every subject – the differentiation between absolutism and despotism –

the whole mass of taxes, whether they are levied on property or on consumption, may be fairly divided among the whole body of the nation. But the far greater part of the lands of ancient Gaul, as well as the other provinces of the Roman world, were cultivated by slaves, or by peasants whose dependent condition was a less rigid servitude. In such a state the poor were maintained at the expense of the master who enjoyed the fruits of their labour; and as the rolls of tribute were filled only with the names of those citizens who possessed the means of an honourable, or at least of a decent subsistence, the comparative smallness of their numbers explains and justifies the high rate of their capitation,¹¹²

but did not render them capable of meeting its demands. Slave labour and despotism, an eighteenth-century reader would be inclined to say, tended to go together; but Gibbon does not here tell us whether post-Antonine conditions – the increased threat from Persia, perhaps, increasing the size and costs of the armies – helped bring the empire’s predicament to its post-Constantinian catastrophe. What can be said is that he was aware of a long-established narrative, looking back to the time of the Scipios and the Gracchi, which associated the increase of empire with the increase of servile agriculture and the replacement of citizen armies with professionals paid by the state; and we have seen him looking back to Polybian images when explaining the defects of Constantinian monarchy.

An account of the late imperial tax system, textually based but still rhetorical, thus completes what Gibbon has to say of the ‘new policy’ founded by Constantine. Chapter 17 concludes with a portrayal of its citizens, still reasonably secure and cultivated, but incapable of comprehending their own loss of freedom and virtue. Gibbon has successfully shown what was new about Constantine’s monarchy, but the causes of its forthcoming decline do not differ much from the ‘secret poison’ lying at the root of the Antonine system; both are measured, and their decline explained, by their distance from a republican point of departure. This may have been enough for Gibbon’s readers, but it leaves unsatisfied a modern enquirer in search of new themes in Gibbon’s historiography. The *Codex* and *Notitia* date from the era of Theodosius II, when the

¹¹¹ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 637–8. ¹¹² p. 638.

empire was divided and its western half disintegrating; but they assume it to be a single system, and do not open the door to the new history that will take shape when the *illustres* and the *magistri militum* survive only in the empire ruled from the Bosphorus. Gibbon has yet to meet the challenge of narrating western and eastern history as separate yet related narratives. There is another new history which chapter 17 has foretold but not yet reached.

(VI)

‘A new city, a new policy’. A new religion? The last words occurred at the beginning of our enquiry,¹¹³ but nothing related to them has been found in the whole of chapter 17; this though the *Codex*’s last book is devoted to ecclesiastical laws and offices.¹¹⁴ Nor will ecclesiastical history appear, even fleetingly, in chapters 18 or 19. The former has to do with the deterioration of Constantine’s personality in the later years of his reign – to which his Christianity is marginal though present – and the struggles over the succession after him. The latter will relate Constantius’s reign, down to the time when Julian appears in the west as a possible challenger. Only then – and separating the narrative from the events of Julian’s reign – does Gibbon insert chapters 20 and 21, which recount and examine Constantine’s conversion to Christianity, the ways in which this alters the historian’s view of him, the foundation of disputatious theology – last heard of in chapter 15 – the Council of Nicaea, the advent of Athanasius and the disputes between Nicene and Arian factions throughout the reign of Constantius. The *Decline and Fall* now comes to consist of two histories, even two kinds of history, intimately related, or so we are told, but incapable of being related together.

This problem has been with us, and with Gibbon, since the caesura separating chapters 14 and 15. In the last volume of this series it was argued that chapters 15 and 16 were a first and ill-starred attempt to deal with the problem of sacred history, and that not until chapter 21 did Gibbon articulate ways of relating it as history. The separation between sacred and imperial has created the impression that his sole purpose in writing imperial history had been to dismiss sacred history as irrelevant or absurd; and there persists to this day a mirror-image of this belief in the form of a conviction that his sole or predominant ‘cause’ for the decline of

¹¹³ p. 16, above.

¹¹⁴ Godefroy, *tom. VI, pars I* (1743): ‘*in quo agitur de iis quae pertinent ad personas et res ecclesiasticas*’.

empire was the negative agency of the church.¹¹⁵ But the first fourteen chapters of the *Decline and Fall* had narrated the decline of the Antonine monarchy – and could as Gibbon knew have narrated that of the Augustan principate – as the effect of causes among which Christianity had yet to appear, and we have just considered one chapter among three in which the Constantinian monarchy is supplied with fatal weaknesses among which it has not been mentioned yet. It is hard to believe that once the new religion appears, the new city and the new policy are dismissed from further consideration.

The problem presented by chapters 17 through 21 is neither the first nor the last of a series of massive postponements in which ecclesiastical history is deferred until imperial history has been related. The explanation cannot be that Gibbon thought – even if he would have liked to think – that imperial and social history were the sole reality, and ecclesiastical history a mere intrusion of the unreal. He was a better historian than that, and if he had thought the church the principal cause of the empire's fall he would have given it a higher priority than he does. It would seem at this point in the enquiry that we may have to choose between two readings. Either Gibbon recognised imperial and ecclesiastical history as two great but incompatible narratives which could not be brought together; or, more simply still, he remains a late humanist and an early modern practitioner of the *ars historica*, faced with a variety of authorities and a diversity of narratives he was obliged to relate separately. To apply the Collingwoodian term 'scissors and paste' to Edward Gibbon would indeed be the height of un wisdom; but in order to decide how far he was a modern and how far an early modern historian, we may have to consider what kinds of historiography he had before him and what kind of historian they commanded him to be.

¹¹⁵ Womersley, 1988, 1994 (I, pp. xxvi–xxvii) and 2002. His interpretation rightly includes an emphasis on the 'fragility' of Gibbon's 'authorial identity'.

2 Constantine to Julian: the disintegration of a dynasty

(I)

In chapter 17, then, Gibbon embarked on a new narrative after the interruption of chapters 15 and 16; one which, by the time he published it, was to carry his history to the end of the empire in the western provinces. The chapter begins with the foundation of a new Rome, which might be placed among the causes of the loss of the west, but signals the further consequence that Constantinople is to be the capital of an empire that will survive that loss and have another history than that arising from Rome. ‘Byzantine’ history, in other words, has been foreshadowed. Chapter 17, however, continues to suppose a single empire, and to offer causes for both its strength and survival and its weaknesses and decay, giving a clear indication that the history of the empire is to be found in its institutions; their history is to be considered before that of ‘wars and revolutions’. The *Decline and Fall* from its outset has been divided into occasionally alternating chapters, descriptive first and narrative second, and volume II is not to change this.

It has further emerged, however, that Gibbon is to be seen moving between two kinds of historiography and two moments in the history of each. The institutions that both strengthened the empire and led to its partial fall were those in which Constantine continued a set of innovations originated by Diocletian, and these – administrative, military and fiscal in character – were known to Gibbon less from any narrative history ancient or modern than from great official documents promulgated in late imperial history and edited at a time two or more centuries before Gibbon, when early modern historiography was being transformed by the advent of new kinds of scholarship. As Gibbon continued his history, however, the narrative of action must return, if only because the ‘histories’ available to him were overwhelmingly of this kind and the *Codex* and *Notitia* merely provided the contexts that made them intelligible. We need, then, to explore Gibbon’s relation to historiography both ancient and modern.

In chapters 18 and 19, Gibbon had a narrative to write, that of the succession to Constantine, and the reign of Constantius to the advent of the future emperor Julian. After chapters 20 and 21 – extremely important because they begin Gibbon’s history of the church in the empire, and therefore a new kind of historiography – the narrative is resumed, and the remainder of volume II, chapters 22 through 26, is dominated by the personality and career of Julian and the history written by Ammianus Marcellinus. At this point we need to remind ourselves that ‘histories’ in antiquity were narratives of actions, usually those performed by emperors and other ruling figures, and were written – perhaps originally for oral performance – by rhetoricians or those trained in rhetoric. Often intended for the purposes of that art, they obeyed its conventions moral and literary, sometimes at the expense of a veracity thought to be of real but not exclusive importance; and while the differences between a history and a panegyric (or invective) were known and recognised, the boundaries between them were permeable. Some of the histories Gibbon uses are literary exercises; some of his historical information is drawn from panegyrics and orations; and in one important case, the career of Stilicho, he is embarrassed but undeterred by finding he must rely on the poet Claudian. The *ars historica*, however, had been in part succeeded by the *ars critica*; for at least a century before Gibbon, modern ‘historians’ (if ‘moderns’ might call themselves such) were no longer obliged merely to repeat and embellish what the ‘ancients’ had told them, but could find their way about among their sources and construct accounts they thought critically reliable. There were few narrative sources in antiquity other than histories; Gibbon could consult the *Codex Theodosianus* but Ammianus could not; and the first duty of a modern with a new subject before him remained to find the ancient historian who had best narrated it.

A crucial distinction between the ‘historian’ and the mere ‘orator’ was that the former should have taken part in or witnessed the actions he narrated, or have interviewed those who had. Here Ammianus Marcellinus,¹ last of the ancient historians, is better qualified than most of his predecessors; his own adventures as a staff officer in the armies of Constantius form part of his narrative of their campaigns, and in relating the campaign of Julian in Persia he frequently refers to the armies in the first person plural. He is more than a historian of these wars, however; his history, partly lost, seems to have begun in the reign of Nerva – the point, whether he knew it or not, where Tacitus had chosen to stop – and continues through that of Julian, whose extraordinary personality makes

¹ Rolfe, 1939/1986. For a detailed study and interpretation of him, see Matthews, 1989. Cf. the sterner criticism of Barnes, 1998. See also Burrow, 2007, ch. 10; *FDF*, pp. 77–8.

for a history like no other, to that of Valens and the disaster of Adrianople in 378. Here Ammianus stops, holding back from the reign of Theodosius as Tacitus had held back from that of Nerva; and here Gibbon brings volume II to an end. Ammianus is writing a history of the principate, not merely of *res gestae*; but because we know less than we might about the kinds of information available to him, it is hard to be sure what manner of historian he was or that we are not ascribing our ways of thinking and writing to him. The ancients were aware of institutional change, but did not write its history; when they mention it, they do so more by way of rhetoric. The author of *De mortibus persecutorum*² denounces Diocletian for orientalism, over-taxation and dividing the empire, because he was a persecutor; Zosimus brings similar charges against Constantine for the contrary reason that he was a Christian. When Gibbon speaks of the interplay between the narratives of actions and of institutions, and builds a catalogue of changes of the latter kind, listing policies that led to the fall of the empire, we have to ask ourselves how much of all this he derived from the ancients and how much he had excellent reasons for reading into them. Zosimus thought he was relating the fall of an empire a hundred years before his time; Ammianus was not telling such a story.

Gibbon's first chapter of 1781 began building up a narrative of how division of the empire, the weakening and barbarisation of the legions, and the weight of despotic over-taxation had left the Romans unable to maintain the frontiers of empire. We have seen that some of this at least was a continuation of 'the first decline and fall', the narrative of how the loss of liberty had left citizens unable to defend themselves and subject to emperors, legions and barbarians in that order. It is probable that this was a narrative long shaped in the minds of European scholars, which they used in interpreting the ancient historians rather than discovering it in them. We must now ask how it appears in the next two chapters of the *Decline and Fall*, which Gibbon based on Ammianus and other ancients whom he used. As for the philosophical historians of the age of Enlightenment, they have yet to come to our attention, as have the historians of the church.

(II)

Chapter 18 opens with the deterioration of Constantine's personality after his achievement of supreme power; the moment of the 'revolution' which made possible such massive changes as 'a new capital, a new policy and a

² Given at *RFT*, p. 82. For Gibbon's doubts about the author's identity, see Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1232, and the text referred to. Modern authors seem to agree on ascribing the text to Lactantius.

new religion'. His degeneration is in no way the consequence of these innovations; it is a story told of many princes and emperors before and after Constantine, and needs no more sophisticated historiography than rhetoricians usually supply in their narratives. Constantine, becoming a jealous tyrant as he grows older, is indeed contrasted with Augustus, who from 'the tyrant of the republic' became 'almost by imperceptible degrees . . . the father of his country and of human kind', but we are not taken back to the analyses that show how this metamorphosis was grounded in hypocrisy, and Gibbon's language is less Tacitean or Montesquieuan than it was earlier. 'A secret but universal decay was felt in every part of the public administration', but this is not an account of decay specific to the institutions of the new policy, and means no more than that the ageing Constantine was surrounded by 'unworthy favourites enriched by the boundless liberality of their master';³ that the new institutions required new taxation is barely mentioned. The peak or nadir of tyranny is of course furnished by the execution of his son Crispus, in circumstances that remain unexplained;⁴ but here too Gibbon is telling no new story, and we are in the familiar scenario of palace politics, with rival heirs and sinister matriarchs recalling Tacitus's portraits of Tiberius and Livia. Gibbon is indeed inclined to doubt the tradition that the empress Fausta played the role of Phaedra and was suffocated in a steam bath;⁵ but he is doing no more than criticising a narrative, and nothing in chapter 17 is relevant here. The problem is simply that of succession, which the principate has never solved. Just as the sequence of the nominated 'five good emperors' was terminated by the misfortune that Marcus Aurelius had a lawful son, so Diocletian's experiment with Augusti and Caesares is destroyed by the greater misfortune that Constantine after Crispus's execution has three, with whom he quite inexplicably associates two nephews. Five Caesares at once is more than any system can bear, and though 'the royal youths' are educated in 'the Christian faith, the Grecian philosophy, and the Roman jurisprudence', they all suffer from 'the misfortune of being born and educated in the imperial purple'.⁶ We have returned at one step to the point at which Gibbon's narrative began with Commodus; in a monarchy in any case ambiguous and imperfectly legitimate, there was no way in which an heir could learn to rule from experience, and if he had brothers he could compete with them only by intrigue and assassination. The story was already familiar and did not require any innovation in the historian's art.

Constantine is able to control his heirs while he lives, and the historiographic field is enlarged from the narrative of princes and palaces by 'the

³ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 645. ⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 647–50. ⁵ pp. 650–1. ⁶ p. 654.

active part' he assumes 'in the wars of the Goths and Sarmatians'.⁷ It is a weighty moment, since the theme of barbarism is being reintroduced after a long interval in which we have been attending to the new form of empire. At the end of chapter 7, it will be recalled, we were told that the barbarians were about to discover 'the weakness of a declining empire'⁸, and chapters 8 and 9 described the very dissimilar barbarians of the east (the Persians) and the north (the Germans). By the opening of chapter 10 we knew that an eastward expansion or migration had left the Goths, a German-speaking people, 'in possession of the Ukraine',⁹ and after the major part played by them in what Gibbon certainly considered the crisis of the third century, we were told in chapter 17 that the choice of an eastern capital was dictated by the need to pay attention to the 'barbarians who dwelt between the Danube and the Tanais' (the Don), as well as to the reviving power of the Persian empire.¹⁰ The Roman empire in the east had strategic frontiers north of the Danube and south of the Taurus mountains, while the empire as a whole must respond to the interlocking of those of the Danube and the Rhine.

We think of 'the Roman empire', in the last phase of what we think of as 'the republic', as expanding beyond the Mediterranean basin in two directions: eastward by completing the conquests of the Macedonian kingdoms in Asia, Syria and Egypt, westward by the conquests of Spain, Gaul, the lower Rhineland and south and midland Britain. It seems now desirable to add a third: the establishment, largely during the earlier principate, of a chain of provinces – Rhaetia, Noricum, Dalmatia, Illyria, Pannonia, Maesia and Pontus – north of the Alps and between the Carpathian and Balkan mountain ranges, and following the Danube from its sources near those of the Rhine to its delta on the Black Sea. The formation of this belt of marchlands, sometimes collectively known as 'Illyria' or 'Illyricum', was to maintain Roman control over the settled civilisations of the Mediterranean by protecting them against inroads from what was called the *barbaricum* north of the Danube and east of the Rhine. The failure to maintain Roman management of the Danubian frontier does much to explain the loss of control over the provinces south of the Alps and west of the Rhine, and Gibbon's narrative in volumes II and III of the *Decline and Fall* is that of how this loss of control moved from east to west: the source of many of his problems as a historian. *Imperium* and *barbaricum* also encounter one another on two secondary frontiers, in northern Africa and north-central Britain, and the former is important in the strategy of western

⁷ p. 655. ⁸ pp. 211–12. ⁹ p. 260; 255–60 in general. ¹⁰ p. 586.

collapse; but Gibbon's narrative looks constantly east towards ancient 'Scythia'.

This narrative may be integrated with that of Decline and Fall in an even wider sense. It was soldier-emperors of Illyrian birth from the frontier provinces, from Claudius Gothicus through Aurelian to Diocletian, who restored the empire in the later third century while transforming its character; and the emperors from Constantine to Valens, who continue its transformation while initiating its western disaster, are of Illyrian and Pannonian origin. It is usual to see the later empire as a transfer of power from the urban elites of the Mediterranean – the subject of Gibbon's first chapters – to the military bureaucrats of the Danubian frontier, and to argue that the systems they imposed were more than Mediterranean society could bear. This is a modern thesis, and it is a question how far it is stated in the text of Gibbon's history; but it can be made compatible with the narrative he clearly states and derived from his predecessors, beginning with the decline of the citizen armies of the ancient republics. Power passed to the emperors and the legions they commanded; these could not be integrated with civil society or recruited from the citizenries. The cities lost the will to defend themselves and could not wholly pay for the soldiers who did it for them. The legions, partly paid from the imperial treasury, had also to be settled as colonists upon conquered or expropriated lands. The river frontiers, especially those of the Danube, became the locus of this process, and the 'Illyrian' empire was ruled by military elites from its marchlands, who taxed the cities to pay for their legions. The next step, as had been explained by James Harrington,¹¹ was the recruitment of barbarians, who came to dominate the legions and take over the empire. We will find this process repeatedly envisaged in the *Decline and Fall*, and it will be a question whether any alternative arises to complicate it.

The legions and their commanders were perpetually tempted to intervene in the succession crises from which neither Diocletian's nor Constantine's experiments in associating Augusti and Caesares had been able to deliver the principate, before or after the crisis of the third century. They might at the same time and partly for this reason – as Gibbon had related from the end of chapter 6 – fail to manage the extremely complex and unstable set of relationships which the marches of empire had become. Chapter 18, having shown Constantine's mismanagement of the succession, turned to his management of a frontier war. We need to know what was Gibbon's understanding of this set of problems.

¹¹ Harrington, 1992, p. 46.

A frontier consisting of the full lengths of the Rhine and the Danube rivers would obviously have been indefensible had there been an organised military empire at the heart of what we know as 'Europe' – as there was on the far eastern frontier where Rome confronted the organised power of Persia. Since the *barbaricum* was inhabited by loose confederations of warrior bands, so fluid that we debate whether and how they invented identities for themselves,¹² the frontier, if we may call it that, was not fortified for defence – we debate whether that in Britain was – but was rather an open but militarised marchland, in which legionary camps and their attendant townships interacted with 'barbarians' pursuing mixed strategies of assimilation, alliance, blackmail and invasion, of which 'empire' was the management and 'decline and fall' the breakdown of the capacity to control. All this Gibbon knew because the histories he read recounted it to him, in the form of narratives but not of analysable concepts. There were no barbarian histories because barbarian societies were not dependent upon literacy, and no Roman could imagine writing the narrative history of a barbarian people. Among the moderns, Machiavelli had observed that barbarians were peoples on the move and there was no history to be written of their rulers' decisions,¹³ and Gibbon himself had written that their customs could be described but their politics could not be narrated.¹⁴ The principal ancient source on which he had relied was Tacitus's *De moribus Germanorum*, a *peinture* rather than a *récit*.

Enlightened philosophical history, however, permitted him to elaborate on a distinction, more or less known to Greek and Roman writers, between partly agricultural barbarians inhabiting mountainous, riverine and forested 'Germany', and the pastoral nomads of a grassland 'Scythia' into which it merged,¹⁵ and which he had learned from Joseph de Guignes to see as providing the geography and history of Huns, Turks and Mongols, shaped by the interactions of the Eurasian steppe with settled empires as distant as China.¹⁶ The distinctions between agriculturists and nomads, 'Germans' and 'Scythians', were far from clear or absolute, and the Goths, a Germanic people who had perhaps migrated from Scandinavia to the Ukraine, were often termed 'Scythians' in ancient sources. The Danubian marchland, which they had extended as far as the Don and the Crimea, was a culturally as well as strategically mixed region, and this is made clear when Gibbon introduces the people against whom Constantine makes his last campaign.

¹² For this typically post-modern debate, see Halsall, 2007, ch. 14.

¹³ *FDF*, pp. 225, 227–8. ¹⁴ *BSE*, pp. 91–3. ¹⁵ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 230.

¹⁶ *BSE*, ch. 8.

These are the Sarmatians, of whose language and ancestry Gibbon has nothing to say – he presumably did not know of their role in Polish national mythology – though it is here that he cites for the first time the Comte du Buat's *Histoire Ancienne des Peuples de l'Europe*, a work whose importance to him was to increase.¹⁷ They possess the usual characteristics of savage nomad warriors (as they have since they terrified the exile Ovid three centuries before), and though not more than allies to peoples more powerful than themselves, 'they occasionally assisted their eastern and western neighbours, the Goths and the Germans, with a formidable body of cavalry'.¹⁸ Living south of the Carpathians, they remind the historian to keep these peoples distinct. They touch off a series typical of the frontier wars of the middle Danube; appealing to the Romans against the Goths, they involve Constantine in a Gothic war, in which he ultimately prevails in alliance with Chersonesus, an independent trading city on the Crimean peninsula.¹⁹ A defeat inflicted on the Sarmatians by the Goths, however, impels them to arm the Limigantes, a people puzzlingly described as 'their slaves' but also as 'a hardy race of hunters and herdsman'²⁰ – it is hard to see how these could be slaves – who expel the Sarmatians from their own lands, forcing them to settle as tributaries, some among the Goths, some among the Germans and the greater part in Roman territory. This is Constantine's last triumph.

Imploring the protection and forgiveness of the emperor, they solemnly promised as subjects in peace, and as soldiers in war, the most inviolable fidelity to the empire which should graciously receive them into its bosom. According to the maxim adopted by Probus and his successors, the offers of this barbarian colony were eagerly accepted; and a competent portion of lands in the provinces of Pannonia, Thrace, Macedonia, and Italy, were immediately assigned for the habitation and subsistence of three hundred thousand Sarmatians.²¹

It is *receptio*, the classic Roman policy for dealing with peoples of the marchlands: to exploit their divisions, to defeat them in arms, and when convenient to receive them as subjects, settlers and soldiers. The Decline and Fall is to be the breakdown of this policy; but Gibbon does not here ask why there are empty lands for barbarians to settle, or suggest that there is any unwisdom in receiving them into the Roman armies. Is he concealing these thoughts to unveil them later, or do they simply occur elsewhere in his sources?

Constantine dies at Nicomedia, to be interred at Constantinople, not at Rome. There is here no mention of his deathbed baptism as a Christian;

¹⁷ *DF*, II, ch. 18, n. 40; Womersley, 1994, I, p. 656; III, p. 1201.

¹⁸ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 655–7. ¹⁹ p. 658. ²⁰ p. 659. ²¹ pp. 659–60.

like everything to do with religion, that is for a separate chapter. His death leads to a succession crisis, in which his half-brothers and nephews are massacred in the interest of his sons. Gibbon, who had long ago remarked that ‘in elective monarchies, the vacancy of the throne is a moment big with danger and mischief’,²² can find no information in his sources as to who organised this coup, or whether it was a military revolt, a palace intrigue, or (more probably) a combination of the two.²³ The children Gallus and Julian alone survive as some kind of insurance policy. The three brothers divide the provinces as Augusti: Constantius in the east, Constantine II in the west, and Constans in the central area, from Illyria to Pannonia, which serves as a broad corridor between the two. This is not a division of the empire, but a version of the policy established by Diocletian. Its fragility, obvious to Gibbon, makes its breakdown seem a matter of time; but though only three years pass before Constantine attempts to seize some provinces from Constans and is slain in an ambush, the relation between the surviving brothers lasts ten years longer and is not overthrown by the action of either. The dissolution of their regime, and even the death of Constantine II, are delayed while Gibbon relates another narrative.

While the martial nations of Europe followed the standards of his brothers, Constantius, at the head of the effeminate troops of Asia, was left to sustain the weight of the Persian war.²⁴

The orientalism of Gibbon’s language here is not borne out by the long narratives it introduces, in which the revival of the Persian empire after its defeat by Galerius leads to centuries of campaigning by organised imperial armies. The Persian recovery is the achievement of Shapur (Sapor in Gibbon’s spelling), who succeeds to the throne under exotic circumstances while still *in utero*.

If any credit can be given to this marvellous tale, which seems, however, to be countenanced by the manners of the people and by the extraordinary duration of his reign, we must admire not only the fortune but the genius of Sapor.

Gibbon’s language remains neo-classical; our genius is what we do with our fortune.

In the soft sequestered education of a Persian harem the royal youth could discover the importance of exercising the vigour of his mind and body, and by his personal merit deserved a throne on which he had been seated –

his pregnant mother recumbent on a bed –

²² p. 98. ²³ pp. 661–2. ²⁴ p. 664.

while he was yet unconscious of the duties and temptations of absolute power.²⁵

He is to succeed where Caligula, Nero, Domitian, Commodus and the sons of Constantine have failed: in acquiring the capacities, and the personality, of a ruler and commander while being brought up in a palace. The empire he reorganises is to compete with the Roman in a series of campaigns which display and exhaust the resources of both, for the three centuries which precede their overthrow – partial in the Roman case, absolute in the Persian – by the Arab Muslims. The wars of empire on the Persian frontier will interact with the policing of barbarians on the Danubian.

Constantius and Sapor – to continue with Gibbon to give him that spelling – campaign against one another with varying success in two theatres: the province of Mesopotamia, including the sources of the Tigris to the south-east of Cappadocia, and the satellite kingdom of Armenia where the Roman and Persian empires, with the Christian and Zoroastrian religions, compete for control. These are wars of state, conducted by means not excluding diplomacy and aiming at the possession of fortresses and provinces, and though the Arabs of the desert serve both sides and raid from Ctesiphon to Antioch, they are not wars for control of a barbarian marchland. Sapor usually wins the battles, but Constantius – a conscientious if not skilful general – retains the key fortresses, and there is no sign that either empire is in military decay. Sapor transfers his forces from the Tigris to the Oxus, to deal with an incursion of the semi-nomadic Massagetae, and Constantius's attention is turned west by distractions arising in the mainstream of Gibbon's Roman history. Constans is overthrown and killed by his military commander in Gaul, Magnentius, who dramatically assumes the purple while Constans is thought to be engaging in homosexual foreplay in the bush;²⁶ and on hearing of this the legions of 'Illyricum', from the Danube to the extremity of Greece, similarly elevate their commander Vetranio, a Colonel Blimp figure who seems to have been bewildered by the whole affair.

These are not incidents arising in the context of the systems set up by Diocletian and Constantine. Magnentius indeed has the support of Marcellinus, 'count of the sacred largesses',²⁷ and to this extent one might suppose that the separation of civil from military powers aimed at in the late empire has failed of its purpose. But the ineffectiveness of Constans as Augustus is not given as a cause of Magnentius's action,

²⁵ pp. 664–5.

²⁶ p. 672. I permit myself this Anglo-Antipodean term as a change from the Anglo-European 'forest'.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

and no crisis of succession is going on. Legions have been proclaiming their generals emperors since the days of Nero, and do not always have very coherent reasons for their actions. Gibbon does indeed suggest that Vetrano may have been egged on by 'the princess Constantina, [a] cruel and aspiring woman'²⁸ – there is usually one about – who may have been seeking revenge for the death of her husband Hannibalianus in the massacre of Constantine's nephews; but he gives the legions of Magnentius motives which, however unreal, belong to an earlier phase of Roman history.

The soldiers were convinced by the most specious arguments, that the republic summoned them to break the bonds of hereditary servitude, and, by the choice of an active and vigilant prince, to reward the same virtues which had raised the ancestors of the degenerate Constans from a private condition to the throne of the world.²⁹

Montesquieu had imagined, and Gibbon had once or twice examined, the hypothesis that the legions were able to suppose themselves the citizens they no longer were and the republic as persisting in their own armed assemblies.³⁰ Gibbon is no republican – he inserts at this point an uncharacteristically Tory footnote comparing Magnentius with Simon de Montfort to the latter's disadvantage³¹ – and he is at this point relying on minor historians and orators in whom passages drawn from archaic rhetoric may have survived. But the image of public oratory, addressed to legions formed in their ranks and listening to it seriously, is explicit in his narrative of what follows. Constantius, intent on destroying Magnentius by civil war, persuades Vetrano to assemble his armies (whose commanders he has probably suborned) at a grand conference where they may hear both wearers of the purple and decide between them. In a large plain near modern Sofia

according to the rules of ancient discipline, a military tribunal, or rather scaffold, was erected, from whence the emperors were accustomed, on solemn and important occasions, to harangue the troops. The well-ordered ranks of Romans and barbarians, with drawn swords, or with erected spears, the squadrons of cavalry and the cohorts of infantry, distinguished by the variety of their arms and ensigns, formed an immense circle round the tribunal; and the extensive silence which they preserved was sometimes interrupted by loud bursts of clamour or of applause. In the presence of this formidable assembly the two emperors were called upon to explain the situation of public affairs.³²

And Constantius has no difficulty in bringing Vetrano, who never speaks, to abdicate and retire to private life (where, somewhat unusually, he ends

²⁸ p. 673. ²⁹ p. 672. ³⁰ p. 129. ³¹ Ch. 18, n. 70; p. 672. ³² pp. 675–6.

his days in peace). It can of course be asked how seriously Gibbon took this account of military oratory, for which his main source (as he does not fail to note) was a panegyric pronounced by none other than Julian on an emperor against whom he was himself to assume the purple. No matter how far Gibbon is speaking with forked tongue, he is allowing us to believe if we wish that the legions retained some shreds of republican virtue, and his account of 'the well-ordered ranks of Romans and barbarians' – Constantius's easterners or Vetrician's Danubians – does not suggest that the former were sinking into effeminacy or the latter about to dissolve into warbands. There is a tension between the rhetorical sources he is using in this chapter and the explanatory predictions advanced in its predecessor.

The organised armies of empires persist as we come to the war between Constantius and Magnentius. The latter advances from the west

at the head of a numerous army, composed of Gauls and Spaniards, of Franks and Saxons, of those provincials who supplied the strength of the legions, and of those barbarians who were dreaded as the most formidable enemies of the republic.³³

There is no hint that the *res publica* has lost the power to raise armies of its own subjects or to enlist barbarians in its service, and the 'mortal wound' inflicted by Constantine has yet to take effect. The climactic battle of Mursa begins and ends with the eastern army's success, in which, however,

the Romans of the West soon rallied, by the habits of discipline; and the barbarians of Germany supported the renown of their national bravery . . . The signal victory which Constantius obtained is attributed to the arms of his cavalry. His cuirassiers are described as so many massy statues of steel, glittering with their scaly armour, and breaking with their ponderous lances the firm array of the Gallic legions.³⁴

Julian's panegyric³⁵ is Gibbon's source for this. His cuirassiers – whose chain mail covers the face and hands while permitting the movement of the muscles beneath it – are the cataphracts or *clibanarii* – the Greek word is *thoraxophoroi* – formed in the eastern armies in imitation of the Persian cavalry.³⁶ Julian's own neglect to put on his *thorax* or breastplate was to cause his death in battle some years later. 'The effeminate troops of Asia' smash through 'the firm array' of 'the martial nations of Europe', and 'the huge bodies of the Germans' – barbarians conventionally have huge bodies – are driven into the river by the horse-archers who follow the

³³ p. 677. ³⁴ p. 679. ³⁵ Wright, 1913/2002., I, pp. 97–9, 153.

³⁶ Gibbon does not give much account of this change in Roman tactics.

cuirassiers. Does Gibbon care nothing for the discrepancies between rhetoric and narrative? The latter

justifies the observation of an ancient writer, that the forces of the empire were consumed in the fatal battle of Mursa, by the loss of a veteran army, sufficient to defend the frontiers, or to add new triumphs to the glory of Rome.³⁷

Gibbon's English may read a little more into his ancient source than its Latin contains; but we in our turn read him as anticipating the disaster of Adrianople twenty-five years later, when the eastern empire lost its strategic reserve. When did it become impossible to read late imperial history without presupposing the Decline and Fall? Chapter 18 concludes with the final defeat and death of Magnentius, and the reign of terror which the imperial inquisitors exercised as far as Britain.

(III)

In footnote 21 to chapter 19, Gibbon remarks:

Instead of being obliged to collect scattered and imperfect hints from various sources, we now enter into the full stream of the history of Ammianus, and need only refer to the seventh and ninth chapters of his fourteenth book.³⁸

There could be no better illustration of the point that Gibbon was still living in the mental world of early modern historiography, where the first move must be to find an authority to follow – preferably and almost necessarily an earlier historian – and the second was to read him critically. For all the advances historiography has made since his day, we are not so far removed from that world as we think; if we want a narrative of actions by powerful individuals, we may still be in need of historians who have spoken with them and told us what happened. We find them perhaps in modern investigative reporters: a Halberstam or a Woodward. Gibbon had earlier remarked:

The sincerity of Ammianus would not suffer him to misrepresent facts or characters, but his love of *ambitious* ornaments frequently betrayed him into an unnatural vehemence of expression.³⁹

Historiography was still rhetoric, and that ornament never interfered with the representation of facts had still to be a matter of faith, and of authority. Did Gibbon believe it? The immediate point, however, is that Ammianus has emerged as a master. The point where Gibbon begins chapter 19 is almost the point where Ammianus's surviving text begins:

³⁷ p. 680.

³⁸ p. 690.

³⁹ pp. 687–8, footnote 16; Gibbon's emphasis.

the iniquities of Constantius's security service followed by the misdeeds and downfall of the Caesar Gallus; and Gibbon's second volume will end where Ammianus declares his history finished, as the empire sets about recovery from the disaster of Adrianople. There is a deeper affinity: both works are preoccupied with the personality and career of the emperor Julian, called 'the apostate'; because of his attempt to turn the clock back to imperial paganism. This narrative is of special interest to Gibbon and to us, for the light it throws on the interactions between Christianity and philosophy; because of the tensions in his personality as he tried to be philosopher, warrior and emperor at the same time; and above all, because these tensions are revealed, not by historians and rhetoricians but by Julian himself in a series of writings that are both autobiography and self-examination. For the first time since Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*, an emperor's historiography becomes concerned with an emperor's subjective self; Julian tells us not only what he did, but what he was and was not, and what it was like to act and experience as he did. Gibbon had access to the full range of writings by Julian and about him; Ammianus employs his own knowledge of his personality and actions; both are fascinated by the same set of contradictions. Ammianus meanwhile goes beyond the obligation enjoined upon the ancient historian (if obeyed by few of them), of recording actions he had himself witnessed or had interviewed those who had taken part in. He narrates not only the campaigns he saw, but his own subordinate role in them: his adventures as a staff officer, dodging Persian patrols while trying to restore a lost child to his family;⁴⁰ actions of which he is less proud, helping to engineer the liquidation of a general pressured into assuming the purple;⁴¹ actions which he narrates in the first person plural, as Julian's officers try to extricate his army from its predicament in lower Mesopotamia.⁴² Ammianus is no Julian; he is interested in his experiences, not in himself; but both he and Gibbon are relating history beneath and beyond that of empire, or even of barbarism and religion. Whether this interest in the personal is a symptom of the end of antiquity is a question they do not ask and we may ask about them, but cannot ask them directly.

The career and personality of Julian dominate chapter 19; Gibbon knows them primarily from Ammianus, but also from Julian's own writings, the orations of his pagan friend Libanius, and (mistrustfully) from the later pagan historian Zosimus.⁴³ Only when Julian's religious policies come into view are Christian sources relevant, and this will not happen

⁴⁰ Ammianus, 18, 6, 5–11; Rolfe, 1939/1986, I, pp. 438–41.

⁴¹ Ammianus, 15, 5, 25–29; Rolfe 1939/1986, I, pp. 148–51.

⁴² Ammianus, books 24–25, generally.

⁴³ For Gibbon's sources in this part of chapter 19, see particularly notes 24, 26–27, 29, 32–34.

until chapter 23; we are in the presence of the practice of postponement to which Gibbon resorts when religious affairs arise. A secondary theme is the behaviour of Constantius, whom Gibbon considers jealous, irresolute and inefficient, but cannot altogether deny a certain conscientious persistence. Chapter 19, however, opens by telling us that

As that feeble prince was destitute of personal merit in peace or war; as he feared his generals and distrusted his ministers; the triumph of his arms served only to establish the reign of the *eunuchs* over the Roman world. Those unhappy beings, the ancient production of Oriental jealousy and despotism, were introduced into Greece and Rome by the contagion of Asiatic luxury.⁴⁴

The orientalism of this passage is not altogether the product of independently operating prejudice; the principate has been corrupted by the growth of palace government, traceable back to Augustus and Tacitus and arising from forces operating within Roman history. But the horror aroused by the rule of castrated males (the vampires or zombies of the pre-modern imagination) is an effect and cause of what we term orientalism; Gibbon finds their evil influence in 'the general history of Persia, India, and China',⁴⁵ and does not seem to consider why the sexual politics of the palace might lead to exploitation by a class excluded from procreation. Nor does he go on, as a *philosophe* might have, to equate the role of eunuchs with that of a celibate clergy. The narrative proceeds to the overthrow and death of the Caesar Gallus, several times attributed to 'the eunuchs', as if they acted as a single group.⁴⁶ This episode, however, opens up the problem of succession and the behaviour within it of both Constantius and Gallus's half-brother Julian.

Gallus and Julian survive 'the massacre of the Flavian race'⁴⁷ because the sons of Constantine, while liquidating their uncles and cousins, are still in need of successors of their own family, whom they do not supply in the shape of sons. The execution of Gallus therefore leaves Constantius dependent on Julian for a successor, and his jealousy is the product of his dependence. As the story reaches us in a few paragraphs of Gibbon's narrative,⁴⁸ it is first decided not to kill Julian, but to allow him a period of study at Athens learning to be a philosopher, and then to appoint him Caesar in Gaul where he learns to be a military commander and a civil ruler. The foundations of his dual personality are thus laid. Julian's encounter with neo-Platonic philosophy, however, will become important

⁴⁴ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 684. Gibbon's emphasis. ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 685 (n. 7).

⁴⁶ pp. 687, 'the emperor, or rather his eunuchs'; 692, 'desirous of uniting to *their* empire' (Gibbon's emphasis), 'the ensnaring subtleties of the eunuchs'; 695, 'the powerful conspiracy of the eunuchs'.

⁴⁷ p. 663. ⁴⁸ pp. 693–5.

to Gibbon's narrative only when he is emperor; for the present there is no more to say than that

the philosophers of the age ... studied to cultivate the genius, to encourage the vanity, and to influence the devotion of their royal pupil⁴⁹

– the first appearance of Gibbon's ambivalence towards Julian. A deeply attractive figure who will nevertheless continually disappoint him, Julian will often be called a 'hero'⁵⁰ but will never be the hero of Gibbon's narrative, and it is a consequence that the despised Constantius cannot be denied his due. The events of his reign are related by both Ammianus and Gibbon as a dual narrative – Julian's actions in the west, those of Constantius moving east. Ammianus synchronises them, though with intentions of his own; Gibbon, whose intentions are those of a modern, sharply divides them by the insertion of ecclesiastical history. Chapter 19, however, relates them as two series of frontier wars, conducted by a Caesar in the west and an Augustus on the Danube and in Mesopotamia, to the point where the former begins to appear as rival to the latter.

After the elevation of Julian to be Caesar – involving the usual display of oratory to the assembled troops –

the protection of the Rhaetian frontier, and the persecution of the Catholic Church, detained Constantius in Italy above eighteen months;⁵¹

during which Julian, making his way to his command in Gaul, is shown by Ammianus discovering the ambiguities of his situation. Constantius in appointing him Caesar has been moved first by the need to legitimate his dynasty by indicating a successor, second by the need to share responsibility for the frontiers. During the usurpation of Magnentius, Frankish barbarians have been encouraged by Constantius to dominate large areas of Rhenish Gaul and Germany, and in the gap between *limitanei* and *comitatenses* have been looting the countryside while unable to attack the towns.⁵² To Gibbon, though probably not to Ammianus, this is a forecast of disasters to come. The Augustus wishes his generals in the west to deal with the situation, keeping the Caesar in a nominal role. To Julian, and to both historians, this is a sign of jealousy rather than a precaution; they may well have been right, but there is to be an unexpected outcome.

⁴⁹ p. 693. ⁵⁰ Especially, p. 143 below.

⁵¹ p. 698. This sentence summarises two chapters in Ammianus (15, 4, 1 and 15, 7, 6–10) of which the latter contains one of his few allusions to ecclesiastical history, the only one Gibbon desires to make at this stage. The 'persecution' consists of the Arian emperor's deportation of a pope for refusing to deprive Athanasius of his bishopric; pp. 135–36, below.

⁵² pp. 710–11.

Before departing for the Danube, Constantius pays a visit to Rome, where no emperor has been for thirty-two years. Reported by both Ammianus and Gibbon,⁵³ this episode is of greater significance in the history of historiography than in that of empire. The Roman senate, last heard of many chapters earlier in the *Decline and Fall* as 'a venerable but useless monument of antiquity on the Capitoline hill',⁵⁴ reappears as an aristocracy enormously wealthy, fabulously conceited and stubbornly pagan, residing in and around a megacity of slaves and freedmen fed by free corn from Africa. Ammianus has already described both at length,⁵⁵ emphasising the city's role in the history of empire and the huge symbolic significance it has acquired from this. Whatever his intentions, they are vastly enlarged in those of Gibbon. The *Decline and Fall* originated on the Capitoline hill as a vision of how empire moved away from Rome, the loss of empire left it isolated and dilapidated, and the rise of the church left a new empire 'seated on the grave thereof'. Gibbon will reserve his paraphrase of Ammianus's account of a decadent senatorial aristocracy until he confronts them with Alaric's Goths in 410; but Constantius in 357 appears, as he does to Ammianus, a tourist marvelling at the splendour of antiquity – such a tourist as Gibbon had been himself, performing in 1764 a cultural ritual of modernity in the wake of medieval popes and emperors. We are not far from Gibbon's youthful *Essai*, when he had recalled Virgil's contrast between Rome prehistoric and imperial; the 'eternal city' as a panorama of changing images. However, we are two chapters away from a second account of Constantius's visit to Rome, when Gibbon will be obliged to return to it as an event in ecclesiastical history.

Unlike Ammianus, Gibbon does not recount Julian's self-discoveries in Gaul together with the far greater wars of Constantius on the Danube and in Mesopotamia. There are the Quadi, a confederacy of partly Sarmatianised Germans,⁵⁶ and the Sarmatian relation with their former slaves the Limigantes has to be revisited. The latter hold a conference with Constantius – on Roman ground, indicating that the frontier is a zone, not a line – interrupted when someone leaps up with a war cry, hurls his shoe at Constantius's tribunal (a gesture which has survived to the present day) and precipitates a *melée* in which Constantius is put to ignominious flight, but the Limigantes are massacred by the legions.⁵⁷ Though no general, Constantius emerges with credit as an emperor and 'in a pompous

⁵³ Ammianus, 16, 10–15; 17, 4, 5–13; Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 698–700.

⁵⁴ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 387.

⁵⁵ Ammianus, 14, 6, 1–26; Rolfe, 1939/1986, I, pp. 34–53.

⁵⁶ Ammianus, 17, 12, 1–13; Rolfe, 1939/1986, I, pp. 368–75; Womersley, 1994, I, p. 700.

⁵⁷ Ammianus, 19, 11, 8–15; Rolfe, 1939/1986, I, pp. 394–401; Womersley, 1994, I, p. 702.

oration . . . expatiates on his own exploits with much vanity and some truth'.⁵⁸ The Persian war is to be a very different matter.

While the Roman emperor and the Persian monarch, at the distance of three thousand miles, defended their extreme limits against the barbarians of the Danube and of the Oxus, their intermediate frontier experienced the vicissitudes of a languid war and a precarious truce.⁵⁹

Each empire has a *barbaricum* to contend with, but their encounters with each other are conducted through a medium of war and diplomacy, statecraft and reason of state. The wars that are conducted mobilise massive resources and may prove expensive to a point where they threaten exhaustion, but are fought for limited objectives and do not threaten the structure of either empire. It is the Enlightened belief that wars between states may be rationally conducted, whereas it is failure to police a frontier with irrational barbarism that can bring down empires. The 'languid and precarious balance' on the Mesopotamian border is converted into open warfare by unwise intermediaries,⁶⁰ and the war that follows is narrated in detail by both historians, largely because Ammianus converts history into memoir by recounting his own adventures as a participant as well as a witness; a case of Adam Smith's 'sentimental' historiography. The war is massive and destructive, featuring elephants and engines, siege fortifications and the slaughter of civilian populations, but it is fought between equals and its results are inconclusive and less than total. Sapor destroys the city of Amida, but exhausts his resources in doing so; Constantius loses most battles, but successfully defends most fortresses while failing to take the one he besieges. What seems to us the irrationality of war is in fact its rationality; the inconclusive can be negotiated. Meanwhile, a more dangerous simplicity is arising on the barbarian frontier in the west.

The pride of Constantius, and the ingenuity of his courtiers, were at a loss to discover any materials for panegyric in the events of the Persian war; while the glory of his cousin Julian, to whose military command he had intrusted the provinces of Gaul, was proclaimed to the world in the simple and concise narrative of his exploits.⁶¹

It is in a sense the triumph of rhetoric over experience. What has been happening in Gaul, related by Ammianus *pari passu* with the events in Persia, is that the young philosopher has discovered in himself an aptitude for generalship, and has embarked on a learning curve which will result in

⁵⁸ p. 702. The speech is in Ammianus, 17, 13, 25–28; Rolfe, 1939/1986, I, pp. 394–401.

⁵⁹ p. 702.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 703–5; Ammianus (at much greater length), 16, 9; 17, 5 and 14; 18, 4–5.

⁶¹ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 710.

the eviction of the Franks from Gaul – or their conversion from hostiles into recruits – and his own acquisition of the charisma Constantius notably lacks. Neither Ammianus nor Gibbon denies that Julian makes mistakes as he learns the art of war against barbarians as heavily armed as his own men (who are probably their kindred); but they accept his valuation of himself and his probably justified belief that the prefects and generals who try to restrain him are Constantius's agents employed to reduce his stature and independence. Nothing whatever has yet been said about Julian's philosophic or religious convictions; but we are on the way to his confidence in himself as emperor, confronting both the Christian church and the Persian empire.

Gibbon enlarges the rhetoric of Ammianus⁶² in describing the reforms intended by Julian when he wintered at Lutetia, the modern Paris, and set about the role of a civil magistrate.

His salutary influence restored the cities of Gaul . . . and the spirit of industry was revived with the hopes of enjoyment. Agriculture, manufactures, and commerce again flourished under the protection of the laws; and the *curiae*, or civil corporations, were again filled with useful and respectable members; the youth were no longer apprehensive of marriage and married persons were no longer apprehensive of posterity: the public and private festivals were celebrated with customary pomp; and the frequent and secure intercourse between the provinces displayed the image of national prosperity.

This too is rhetoric, as is clear even from the choice of evils being remedied, and Gibbon knew it. The passage immediately preceding it runs:

The precarious and dependent situation of Julian displayed his virtues and concealed his defects. The young hero who supported, in Gaul, the throne of Constantius, was not permitted to reform the vices of government; but he had courage to alleviate or pity the distress of the people. Unless he had been able to revive the martial spirit of the Romans, or to introduce the arts of industry and refinement among their savage enemies, he could not entertain any rational hopes of securing the public tranquillity, either by the peace or conquest of Germany. Yet the victories of Julian suspended for a short time the inroads of the barbarians, and delayed the ruin of the Western Empire.⁶³

This Ammianus could not have written. Gibbon is saying that the Roman empire could only have been saved by the recovery of ancient virtue – Ammianus knew what that was – or the discovery of modern refinement, unknown to Ammianus. But Julian's probably imaginary reforms, including a revival of commerce, convey the image of the Enlightened prince Gibbon would like Julian to have been but knew

⁶² For Ammianus's account of Julian's civil administration, see 16, 5; 17, 3; 18, 1.

⁶³ For both passages, Womersley, 1994, I, p. 723.

he was not. After an account of late antique Lutetia ('where', most un-Enlightenedly, 'the amusements of the theatre were unknown or despised'), Gibbon concludes chapter 19 by writing

If Julian could now revisit the capital of France, he might converse with men of science and genius, capable of understanding and of instructing a disciple of the Greeks; he might excuse the lively and graceful follies of a nation whose martial spirit has never been enervated by the indulgence of luxury; and he must applaud the perfection of that inestimable art which softens and refines and embellishes the intercourse of social life.⁶⁴

No doubt this is a postscript to Gibbon's sojourn in Paris in 1777; it also contains the image of the modern philosopher Gibbon wishes Julian could have been. The 'inestimable art' is that of conversation, philosophically remote from the dialogues or monologues of the schools of Athens, and from Julian's reputation for talking too much; his magically inclined neo-Platonism has yet to appear. Gibbon knows he is imagining a Julian who never existed, a reign that is a late antique Camelot, a brief shining moment when things might have been other than they were. What this was, and why it could not be, will take several chapters to explain.

⁶⁴ p. 724.

Part II

The Church in the Empire

3 Constantine's second revolution

(I)

The two chapters that follow – numbered 20 and 21 – have already received attention in a preceding volume of this series.¹ As chapters 17 through 19 take up the theme of imperial history after the hiatus of chapters 15 and 16, so, it was argued, do these begin Gibbon's history of the church in the empire after the imperfect beginning – if not the false start – made in 15 and 16. In 20 and 21, it was contended, Gibbon found means of treating Christian belief and practice as the subject of a historical narrative that had previously evaded him, and could proceed without making, though never without implying, statements that indicated his unbelief and seemed to make it the purpose of his history. In the chapters published in 1781 and after, he could set out his narratives of both imperial and ecclesiastical history and show how they had affected one another.

We cannot proceed with this, however, without noting that chapters 20 and 21 are themselves a hiatus and an interruption. Volume II of the *Decline and Fall* has so far been a narrative of the foundation of empire by Constantine and the subsequent disintegration of his dynasty if not his system; and as a narrative of empire, with no mention of the church, it has reached the point where Julian as Caesar in the west is beginning to appear a rival to Constantius as Augustus in the centre and east. At this moment Gibbon inserts two chapters which take him back not merely to the opening of the volume, but to the close of chapter 14 five years earlier, where 'the foundation of Constantinople' was paired with 'the establishment of the Christian religion' as Constantine's revolutionary innovations. He proceeds to survey the entire period so far covered as ecclesiastical history rather than imperial, before resuming the career of Julian in chapter 22 and its sequels, and we have to assess his action as a historian in doing so.

¹ *RFT*, pp. 380–4. By an error on the author's part, references to chapter 20 occur on these pages which should have been to chapter 21.

Chapters 15 and 16 delayed the commencement of a narrative; 20 and 21 divide it into two while interrupting the first of them. That is to say, a secular narrative of the Constantinian dynasty has begun and reached a certain point, but is now suspended while Gibbon returns to his starting point and recapitulates the period covered as one in the history of the church. Do the two narratives tell a common story? The answer proves both complex and complicated. In the first place, we are reminded that Gibbon was an early modern historian obliged to rely upon the historians he criticised. He must retail ecclesiastical history as it had been related by the ecclesiastical historians, who now appeared as presences in the history he was relating, and these authors had concerns and methods of their own which determined the history he was obliged to relate. The ecclesiastical historians emerging in late antiquity were themselves rhetoricians, but chose their own narratives: persecution and martyrdom before Constantine, heresy, councils and the beginnings of monasticism after him; narratives in which emperors might or might not play determining roles and the structure of empire was not the immediate subject. It was to this extent inevitable that ecclesiastical and imperial history should be related separately; they were shaped by separate groups of historians and might be seen – as they had been by Mosheim – as the histories of distinct if not separate societies. Master narratives might emerge in ecclesiastical history; there was one that had the Council of Nicaea as its central episode, another – which Gibbon had begun to relate – whose climax was the failure of Julian's attempt to refound the empire on a basis neo-Platonist rather than Christian. Emperors were actors in both these narratives, but it would be too much to say that the structures of empire and church were interacting and changing in them. Certainly the late antique historians Gibbon followed did not see things this way.

His ecclesiastical historians included early moderns as well as ancients: Catholics like Tillemont and Fleury, Protestants like Godefroy and Mosheim. The last-mentioned is present but not dominant in chapters 20 and 21;² his predecessor is important because his edition of the *Codex Theodosianus* (he also edited the non-orthodox historian Philostorgius and the pagan orator Libanius) contains a lengthy study of the jurisdiction of emperors in matters ecclesiastical. Here we encounter the major early modern contribution to ecclesiastical historiography: the merger of judicial and philological research with controversy between Catholics and Protestants, papalists and conciliarists – even papalists and imperialists in the centuries we call medieval – who set up differing interpretations of what Constantine and his successors had done, differing accounts of the

² *DF*, ch. 20, n. 16 (Womersley, 1994, I, p. 730); ch. 21, n. 22 (p. 773); n. 30 (p. 775); n. 41 (p. 778), n. 54 (p. 782), n. 102 (p. 798).

structure of authority in the late antique church and the late antique empire in relation to it, even differing accounts of the ecclesiology and theology that justified and underlay these structures. It is here also that we encounter Gibbon – above all in the footnotes to the *Decline and Fall* – as a learned and critical participant in these debates, whose vast literature he knew well.³ There were of course levels in Gibbon's mind on which as a *philosophe* he thought many of these debates, both in Christian antiquity and in the centuries preceding his own, unmeaning and therefore harmful. As a historian, however, he knew that they must be taken seriously, if only because the actors in his history had taken them seriously, and that he could not understand them without becoming to a certain degree engaged in them. There are moments in these chapters when his engagement takes unexpected and surprising forms. Before reaching them, however, we should take account of his passing mention of the 'protestant and philosophical readers of the present age',⁴ and recognise that it was sometimes more as a Protestant than as a philosopher that he reached understanding of ecclesiastical and even sacred history; while Catholic and Counter-Reformation authorities from Baronius to Tillemont also play leading roles.

Thumbnail sketches of 'the Enlightenment' and of Gibbon as 'philosophical historian' may not, therefore, be of much help in understanding what he is doing in chapters 20 and 21 of the *Decline and Fall*. This side of his *persona* cannot, however, be left out of account, if only because of the incessantly persisting image, shaped soon after 1776, of Gibbon as unbeliever and ironist, employing literary art to convey a message of unbelief – and with it one of Christianity as a major force weakening the Roman empire – that was his central purpose in writing his history. To proponents of this image it may even appear that he separated ecclesiastical from imperial history with the intention of showing the former as both ridiculous and destructive. The counter-argument is that what he did not believe he took seriously as history, and therefore took seriously the beliefs of those who did. The debate between these two positions can be resumed by exploring the text of chapters 20 and 21.

(II)

Gibbon opens chapter 20 with what seems at first an unequivocal declaration that he is about to engage in what we now term 'practical history',

³ A study of the footnotes to these chapters will substantiate what is said here. In general, the volumes of *Barbarism and Religion* are concerned with Gibbon as historian; a study of Gibbon as scholar and *érudit* would be an undertaking of even greater magnitude.

⁴ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 742.

written because its interpretation has direct consequences for the self-understanding of the present the historian and his readers inhabit. This in the eighteenth century was distinguished from history that was merely 'amusing', meaning that it appealed solely to the curiosity and the imagination of its readers. Once it was conceded, however, that history was a study of human nature, the distinction between the two began to break down; the imagination might have practical consequences, or might challenge what had previously been considered 'practical'. Gibbon had known this since his earliest writings; and his awareness was shared with other historians of his era. It may have some bearing on the paradoxical conclusion to which his emphasis on the practical leads as he opens this chapter.

The public establishment of Christianity may be considered as one of those important and domestic revolutions which excite the most lively curiosity, and afford the most valuable instruction. The victories and the civil policy of Constantine no longer influence the state of Europe; but a considerable portion of the globe still retains the impression which it received from the conversion of that monarch; and the ecclesiastical institutions of his reign are still connected, by an indissoluble chain, with the opinions, the passions, and the interests of the present generation.⁵

To refer to the establishment of Christianity as 'one of' several 'important and domestic revolutions' would not of course satisfy a Christian reader, for whom it was an event in sacred history, part of the transformation of human life in relation to God which had followed the birth and death of Jesus Christ. Several of Gibbon's evangelical critics were already arguing that the history, if it was a history, of this transformation was the only one worth writing, and would see Gibbon's opening sentence as the anti-Christian move it quite possibly was. But the transformation of history by Christians had also been a transformation of civil history by the introduction of ecclesiastical, and this was to be a theme of the *Decline and Fall* from this point on. How the supernatural virtues had been revealed, what structure of authority they had set up in the church, and how they impinged upon civil society and civil authority, were questions arousing 'the opinions, the passions, and the interests' not merely 'of the present generation', but of every generation since Constantine's time, and had received so many conflicting answers that Gibbon was not committed to asserting or attacking any one of them, but merely to embarking on the history of the Christian debate.

⁵ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 725.

To say as he had that Constantine's 'civil policy no longer influence[d] the state of Europe' was not quite true in the light of chapters 17 and 18, which had begun to show how the translation of empire to Constantinople had furthered the division of the Roman empire into east and west. The word 'Europe' must now denote a post-Roman, post-barbaric and even post-papal west which no longer found the institutions of the late empire of practical relevance, or considered the Orthodox and Ottoman east part of its history. Gibbon now begins to trace the 'indissoluble chain' which links the establishment of Christianity by Constantine with the present state of western Europe; and he has written five chapters on other matters before returning to the point in the first volume at which the problem first appeared. The location of church history in the structure of the *Decline and Fall* remains a question to be answered.

In the consideration of a subject which may be examined with impartiality, but cannot be viewed with indifference, a difficulty immediately arises of a very unexpected nature; that of ascertaining the real and precise date of the conversion of Constantine.⁶

After this rather curious opening – he nowhere tells us what he means by 'unexpected' or what he had expected to find – Gibbon devotes half of the first of two rich and complex chapters to telling us that no precise date for Constantine's conversion can in fact be found, because the process was long, delayed and ambiguous. The emperor was not baptised a Christian until he was on his deathbed; Gibbon has a learned footnote on the practice of delayed baptism, of which he expresses disapproval;⁷ and long after Constantine announced his Christianity, 'he persevered till he was forty years of age in the practice of the established religion'⁸ of civic polytheism. Gibbon is exploring two questions, whether this conversion was sincere and whether it was miraculous, and is resolved in both cases to reduce it to a process taking place in a human mind. He is not concerned to denounce Constantine as a hypocritical politician or to applaud him as a benign sceptic; nor was he a self-deceiving enthusiast like so many primeval legislators.⁹

The Christianity of Constantine must be allowed in a much more vague and qualified sense; and the nicest accuracy is required in tracing the slow and almost imperceptible gradations by which the monarch declared himself the protector, and at length the proselyte, of the church. It was an arduous task to eradicate the

⁶ *Ibid.* ⁷ Ch. 20, n. 68; p. 746. ⁸ p. 727.

⁹ Cf. Anquetil-Duperron, *BSE*, pp. 34–5. The reader may wish to recall Voltaire's insistence (*NCG*, p. 149) that Henri IV's conversion to Catholicism was *politique* and therefore neither fanatical nor hypocritical. Neither Voltaire nor Gibbon may have thought this option open to Constantine. For Clovis the Frank as a 'new Constantine', see below, p. 461.

habits and prejudices of his education, to acknowledge the divine power of Christ, and to understand that the truth of *his* revelation was incompatible with the worship of the gods. The obstacles which he had probably experienced in his own mind instructed him to proceed with caution in the momentous change of a national religion; and he insensibly discovered his new opinions, as far as he could enforce them with safety and with effect.¹⁰

This is not innuendo; Constantine is behaving as a reasonable being, and Gibbon's critics would have had trouble presenting this sentiment as 'sneer'. It does not quite reach the point where conviction becomes conversion, and Gibbon cannot altogether refrain from for once invoking philosophical deism. Speaking of Constantine's language in the edict of Milan early in his reign, he says:

From these vague and indefinite expressions of piety, three suppositions may be deduced, of a different, but not an incompatible, nature. The mind of Constantine might fluctuate between the Pagan and the Christian religions. According to the loose and complying notions of polytheism, he might acknowledge the God of the Christians as *one* of the *many* deities who composed the hierarchy of heaven. Or perhaps he might embrace the philosophical and pleasing idea that, notwithstanding the variety of names, of rites, and of opinions, all the sects and all the nations of mankind are united in the worship of the common Father or Creator of the universe.¹¹

Gibbon's observations on the edict of Milan¹² are disquisitions on the eighteenth-century ideal of toleration, and he is not unaware of the question whether toleration is possible without imprecision leading to indifference. We come closer to the problem of belief and the response of irony when he is defending Constantine against the charge of promoting a fraudulent miracle, and remarks not only that 'in an age of religious fervour, the most artful statesmen are observed to feel some part of the enthusiasm which they inspire',¹³ but:

Nor can it be deemed incredible, that the mind of an unlettered soldier should have yielded to the weight of evidence, which, in a more enlightened age, has satisfied or subdued the reason of a Grotius, a Pascal, or a Locke,¹⁴

words already cited¹⁵ as indicating Gibbon's awareness that the intellects he most venerated were capable of a faith he could not accept. This part of chapter 20 approaches Gibbon's English world – seldom discernible in his writings – when we learn that the characteristics of the new religion that

¹⁰ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 726. Emphasis Gibbon's. 'Discovered' here means 'disclosed'.

¹¹ p. 730. Emphasis Gibbon's. It is possible that he knew this statement became less true as 'the nations of mankind' progressed farther east, and religions appeared having no creator god. *RFT*, ch. 5.

¹² pp. 729, 766. ¹³ p. 743. ¹⁴ p. 744. ¹⁵ *RFT*, p. 376.

most appealed to emperors were its promotion of passive obedience and the divine right of kings,¹⁶ two war cries from a less enlightened age that the Whig Gibbon ought not to have found admirable.

Gibbon does not deny that Constantine arrived at a durable set of Christian convictions, though what they were may be difficult to establish with precision; but the process by which he reached them is delayed, spasmodic and ambivalent enough to render the word 'conversion', though Gibbon uses it, somewhat questionable. Certainly there is no conversion experience, no road to Damascus, in this story; Constantine is neither an apostle nor a saint, he has no transforming spiritual encounter, and there is little or no need of direct divine action to make him a Christian. Gibbon makes this clear when writing of the one occasion on which something of the sort has been said to have occurred. Constantine marches against Maxentius in Rome at the head of an army of 'enthusiasts' (the term should be noted) convinced that they are fighting the battle of the Lord, who will make himself known in their support.

The evidence of ecclesiastical history is prepared to affirm that their expectations were justified by the conspicuous miracle to which the conversion of the first Christian emperor has been almost unanimously ascribed.¹⁷

This, of course, is the famous story of the cross seen in the sky at the battle of the Milvian Bridge, and the dream or vision warning Constantine to place the cross on the soldiers' shields, together with the words *ἐν τούτῳ νίκα* (*in hoc signo vinces*).¹⁸ Before studying Gibbon's investigation of this legend, we should enquire in what sense it announced a 'miracle', and in what sense it marked Constantine's 'conversion'. It was not the experience that made him a Christian – that process had already made some headway – and it was not a sign that he was a spiritual agent endowed with prophetic or apostolic power. The foundation of a Christian empire (which had still some way to go) was not the same as the foundation or proclamation of the church. The latter was a spiritual fellowship, a fellowship with God, and required direct action by God to set it going; a miracle which was either that action itself or a sign that some divine or sanctified being was authorised to perform it. No such action was necessary at the Milvian Bridge, and the *signum* could only 'convert' Constantine in the sense that it assured him and others that he was God's instrument in God's actions. He might be 'equal to the apostles', but he was not an

¹⁶ pp. 731–4; *RFT*, pp. 290–1.

¹⁷ p. 735. Gibbon need not have meant that all Constantine's legionaries were 'enthusiasts'.

¹⁸ pp. 737–8, 741. It is worth mentioning that the *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, an original source, does not credit Constantine with a vision but only a dream; *commonitus est in quiete Constantinus* (Creed, 1984, p. 62).

apostle himself. In the last analysis, the Christianisation (hardly yet begun) of an empire with a long pagan history behind it must be an action by Providence rather than the Spirit, and the cross in the sky was a miracle in the secondary sense of a sign declaring that Providence was at work.

Gibbon's critical analysis of 'the historical, the natural, and the marvelous parts of this extraordinary story',¹⁹ which he investigated with the 'calm suspicion' of the 'philosopher',²⁰ is therefore a standard Enlightened exercise in the criticism of miracles. It leads him to the Humean observation that impostors are rarer than people who believe what they say,²¹ and to the suggestion that Constantine may well have accepted what Grotius, Pascal and Locke could not resist.²² He remarks that this particular miracle went unchallenged by Protestants as well as Catholics, until questioned by Jacques Godefroy in 1643,²³ and still has its defenders; but it is at no point suggested, by him or his detractors, that in challenging this miracle he is challenging the foundations of Christian faith, as he was supposed to have done in chapter 15. The reason is that Constantine is not an apostle; miracles are not required to declare him a divinely authorised being; and the foundation of a Christian empire is the work of Providence, not of the Spirit. An actor chosen by Providence was still an actor in history, and might continue to act as fallibly as any other. Orthodox, Catholic and Trinitarian historians who applauded Constantine's action in convening the Council of Nicaea were not inhibited from noticing his subsequent deviation in the direction of Arianism (a deviation in which Eusebius had been compliant and which Constantius had converted into policy); and papalists and imperialists, papalists and conciliarists, Catholics and Protestants, Trinitarians and Socinians, had continued through the centuries to find Constantine a debatable figure. The orthodox Fleury had remarked that one would do well to accept all the ill said of him by Eusebius and all the good admitted by Zosimus;²⁴ a judgement typical of the *ars critica*. Gibbon, in pursuing the sincerity of his conversion and the miracle that had accompanied it, was perhaps exercising his powers on a question less crucial than they deserved.

(III)

Gibbon now observes that

The mature age of Constantine forfeited the reputation which he had acquired in his youth. As he gradually advanced in the knowledge of truth, he proportionately declined in the practice of virtue; and the same year of his reign in which he

¹⁹ pp. 735–6. ²⁰ p. 740. ²¹ p. 743 ²² p. 72, above.

²³ Ch. 20, n. 53; Womersley, 1994, I, p. 742. ²⁴ Fleury, 1716, III, p. 233.

convened the council of Nice was polluted by the execution, or rather murder of his eldest son,²⁵

but rejects Zosimus's suggestion that he became a Christian because no other religion could clear him of his guilt. He turns from the moral character of Constantine's conversion to its historical consequences.

It was long since established as a fundamental maxim of the Roman constitution that every rank of citizens was alike subject to the laws, and that the care of religion was the right as well as the duty of the civil magistrate. Constantine and his successors could not easily persuade themselves that they had forfeited, by their conversion, any branch of the imperial prerogatives, or that they were incapable of giving laws to a religion which they had protected and embraced. The emperors still continued to exercise a supreme jurisdiction over the ecclesiastical order; and the sixteenth book of the Theodosian Code represents, under a variety of titles, the authority which they assumed in the government of the Catholic Church.

But the distinction of the spiritual and temporal powers, which had never been imposed on the free spirit of Greece and Rome, was introduced and confirmed by the legal establishment of Christianity.²⁶

The modern eye blinks at this; to us the first demand of the free spirit is that the temporal power should not exercise spiritual jurisdiction. Gibbon, however, is an early modern, living at a time when civil liberty and civil authority were nearly inseparable, and the first demand of freedom was that the spiritual power should neither exercise temporal jurisdiction nor – what was almost the same thing – elevate its authority above the civil. The meaning of freedom is being turned inside out, as we pass from an ancient history of republican polytheism to a modern history of revealed monotheism claiming philosophical intelligibility. The new world had first appeared during the persecutions, when

the opposition or contempt of the civil power served to cement the discipline of the primitive church. The Christians had been obliged to elect their own magistrates, to raise and distribute a peculiar revenue, and to regulate the internal policy of their republic by a code of laws, which were ratified by the consent of the people and the practice of three hundred years

so that this republic had existed since the time of the apostles.

When Constantine embraced the faith of the Christians, he seemed to contract a perpetual alliance with a distinct and independent society and the privileges granted or confirmed by that emperor, or by his successors, were accepted, not as the precarious favours of the court, but as the just and inalienable rights of the ecclesiastical order.²⁷

²⁵ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 747; *RFT*, p. 376. ²⁶ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 750.

²⁷ pp. 751–2.

This is not philosophical thinking so much as jurisdictional: the product of centuries of conflicts over *jus*, meaning both right and authority, among Catholics, Protestants and temporal sovereigns. Only the last three words quoted remind us that we are dealing with the rights of ministers rather than worshippers. Under Diocletian the empire had made war on the church because it was a republic within the *res publica*; persecution had failed, and Constantine was now entering into an alliance – whatever the Theodosian Code might say – with a republic ‘administered by the spiritual and legal jurisdiction of eighteen hundred bishops’.²⁸ The Constantinian revolution examined in chapter 17 acquired a new dimension:

While the *civil* and *military* professions were separated by the policy of Constantine, a new and perpetual order of *ecclesiastical* ministers, always respectable, sometimes dangerous, was established in the church and state.²⁹

It is the turning point of western historiography, the moment (I have been told) which Chinese students find most fascinating because nothing like it has occurred in history as they know it. For Gibbon it is the moment when civil and ecclesiastical history become one, yet can never be narrated as a single history because this is a tale of two cities. It is also the moment at which conventional readings of Gibbon locate the ultimate cause of the Decline and Fall: the separate authority of the church, its other-worldly values, and their corruption by wealth, power, dogmatism and intolerance, are presented (we are assured) by Gibbon’s rationalist and deist contempt for religion as bringing down ancient civilisation. What Gibbon actually has to say on the subject has begun to emerge.

The ‘new and perpetual order’ consists of the bishops, not yet subjected, for anything Gibbon says at this point, to the further hierarchy of metropolitans or patriarchs whose rise Mosheim had traced as leading through aristocracy to the monarchy of the popes.³⁰ Bishops at this stage are equal and constitute a republic. Gibbon examines the sources of their authority and power under eight headings,³¹ of which the first is their election by the people in the congregation. Mosheim, once again, had stressed that this authority had begun to pass out of the hands of the people into those of the bishops themselves,³² but Gibbon seems to defer this development, apparently in order to use the image of the republic to emphasise that new forms of freedom as well as power were arising over which the emperor had little control: ‘the subjects of Rome enjoyed in the church the privilege which they had lost in the republic of choosing the

²⁸ p. 752. ²⁹ *Ibid.* Emphasis Gibbon’s. ³⁰ *RFT*, pp. 169, 210–11.

³¹ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 752–3. ³² *RFT*, pp. 198, 210–11.

magistrates whom they were bound to obey'.³³ If the people chose the bishops, however, they did not invest them with their authority; this was sacred and apostolic in origin, and while the bishops administered the vast wealth which pious donations brought to the church,³⁴ and acquired a steadily increasing civil jurisdiction³⁵ that might bring them into conflict with the emperor's officers, they retained and magnified powers of spiritual censure that might extend to the emperor himself. Spiritual authority was further increased by the practice of preaching, not a characteristic of other priesthoods known to Gibbon; the spoken word conveyed the passions of the congregations as well as the authority of bishops, and the Christians are still crowds of enthusiasts rather than the obedient slaves of superstition. We have journeyed some distance from the Christian duty of passive obedience; this republic is highly turbulent as well as highly corruptible, and it is not unknown for bishops to become violent demagogues in the politics of the great unpoliced cities of the later empire. That, however, is not where Gibbon places his emphasis in this chapter; it lies rather on the church as an instrument of legality if not liberty, since it provides an alternative to the power of the emperors.

The rash violence of despotism was suspended by the mild interposition of the church, and the lives or fortunes of the most eminent subjects might be protected by the mediation of the bishop.³⁶

There was a cost to be paid for this.

The bishop was the perpetual censor of the morals of his people ... it was impossible to execute this spiritual censure, if the Christian pontiff, who punished the obscure sins of the multitude, respected the conspicuous vices and destructive crimes of the magistrate; but it was impossible to arraign the conduct of the magistrate without controlling the administration of the government.³⁷

Gibbon records two instances of the excommunication of magistrates by bishops; one by the stern Trinitarian and master statesman Athanasius, who is to be something like the hero of the next chapters; the other by Synesius of Cyrene and Ptolemais, so far a philosopher as to be hardly a Christian at all. 'Such principles and such practices insensibly prepared the triumph of the Roman pontiffs, who have trampled on the necks of kings.'³⁸

There is then a basic ambivalence or irony which will persist to the very end of the *Decline and Fall*, and seems to tell against any simple anti-clericalism in Gibbon's judgement of this central theme in western

³³ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 753. ³⁴ pp. 756–8. ³⁵ pp. 759–60. ³⁶ p. 760.
³⁷ p. 761. ³⁸ pp. 761–2.

Christian history. It re-emerges in the [last section](#) of chapter 20, which deals with the summoning and authority of the general councils of the church – a topic disputed for centuries in ecclesiastical argument.

The representatives of the Christian republic were regularly assembled in the spring and autumn of each year; and these synods diffused the spirit of ecclesiastical discipline and legislation through the hundred and twenty provinces of the Roman world.

The reference here is to provincial synods, summoned by archbishops, metropolitans and patriarchs (known here as ‘primates’) who now appear in Gibbon’s narrative for the first time.

But the convocation of great and extraordinary synods was the prerogative of the emperor alone. Whenever the emergencies of the church required this decisive measure, he despatched a peremptory summons to the bishops or the deputies of each province, with an order for the use of post-horses and a competent allowance for the expenses of their journey.³⁹

Notwithstanding, however, this unequivocal declaration that a general council was a public matter and had met by imperial authority, at the Council of Nicaea – ‘convened ... to extinguish ... the subtle disputes which had arisen in Egypt on the subject of the Trinity’ –

Constantine listened with patience and spoke with modesty; and while he influenced the debates, he humbly professed that he was the minister, not the judge, of the successors of the apostles, who had been established as priests and as gods upon earth. Such profound reverence of an absolute monarch towards a feeble and unarmed assembly of his own subjects can only be compared to the respect with which the senate had been treated by the Roman princes who adopted the policy of Augustus. Within the space of fifty years, a philosophic spectator of the vicissitudes of human affairs might have contemplated Tacitus in the senate of Rome, and Constantine in the council of Nice. The fathers of the Capitol and those of the church had alike degenerated from the virtues of their founders; but as the bishops were more deeply rooted in the public opinion, they sustained their dignity with more decent pride, and sometimes opposed with a manly spirit the wishes of their sovereign.⁴⁰

The concluding sentence somewhat mitigates the irony concealed in those preceding it. The respect shown the senate by Augustus and his successors had been mainly hypocritical and emperors and senators had corrupted each other; the election of the emperor Tacitus in the third century, much dwelt on by Gibbon,⁴¹ had been a dream. Bishops were the superiors of senators because they enjoyed the support of ‘public opinion’; but what manner of public and what kind of opinion? A confederacy of

³⁹ p. 764. ⁴⁰ pp. 764–5. ⁴¹ pp. 275–6. *FDF*, p. 473.

congregations dominated by their preacher-bishops; a body of opinion on spiritual matters, often fanatical and enthusiastic. The ancient republic had believed in itself; the Christian republic believed in another world. If the foundations of Christian liberty were in the Spirit, it was a question whether the word 'public' was applicable. In later volumes of the *Decline and Fall*, the popes will be shown refounding a republic at Rome, but it will be asked whether this was indeed a republic.⁴² Gibbon's judgement is ambivalent; his language is loaded less towards answering the question than towards asking it.

Chapter 20 does not end here. From the words quoted Gibbon continues:

The progress of time and superstition erased the memory of the weakness, the passion, the ignorance, which disgraced these ecclesiastical synods; and the catholic world has unanimously submitted to the *infallible* decrees of the general councils.⁴³

He appends a footnote:

See the article CONCILE in the Encyclopédie ... the author, M. le docteur Boucher, has discussed, according to the principle of the Gallican church, the principal questions which relate to the form and constitution of general, national and provincial councils. The editors ... have reason to be proud of *this* article. Those who consult their immense compilation seldom depart so well satisfied.⁴⁴

And an earlier footnote had run:

The subject of ecclesiastical jurisdiction has been involved in a mist of passion, of prejudice, and of interest. Two of the fairest books which have fallen into my hands are the Institutes of Canon Law, by the Abbé de Fleury, and the Civil History of Naples, by Giannone. Fleury was a French ecclesiastic who respected the authority of the parliaments; Giannone was an Italian lawyer, who dreaded the power of the church. And here let me observe that as the general propositions which I advanced are the results of *many* particular and imperfect facts, I must either refer the reader to those modern authors who have expressly treated the subject, or swell these notes to a disagreeable and disproportionate size.⁴⁵

Gibbon never thought much of the *Encyclopédie*, and writings about the church were usually more clerical and juristic than *philosophie*. Giannone, whom he had been reading since his earliest studies,⁴⁶ was a jurist before he was a philosopher; Gibbon knew his *Istoria Civile* but not his *Triregno*.⁴⁷

⁴² *DF*, chs. 69 and 70. ⁴³ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 765. Emphasis Gibbon's.

⁴⁴ Ch. 20, n. 130; p. 765. Page references omitted. Emphasis Gibbon's.

⁴⁵ n. 111, p. 759. Emphasis Gibbon's.

⁴⁶ *EEG*, pp. 80, 82; *YEG*, pp. 68–71; Trevor-Roper, 2010, pp. 50–3.

⁴⁷ On this and Giannone's later writings, see Trevor-Roper, 2010; Robertson, 2006, *passim*. It will be seen that I differ from Trevor-Roper on the question of Gibbon's move into

(whatever he might have thought of the latter) and joins here with those who included him in the Gallican school.⁴⁸ The Enlightenment with which we have to do at this point is neither Montesquieuan nor Voltairean, but closer to what we now term a ‘Catholic Enlightenment’, Gallican at the outset of the century, Febronian towards its close, and inclined to make councils the correctors of popes, and the spiritual authority of bishops independent of the papal supremacy.⁴⁹ We are at a point from which it is possible to catch sight, however remotely, of Gibbon’s unexpectedly complex view of the history of the western church and its papacy.

philosophical deism, which I see as more heavily contextualised and conditioned than he did, while remaining deeply indebted to his work on ‘the religious origins of Enlightenment’ (I omit his use of the definite article).

⁴⁸ A footnote in the later *Decline and Fall* (ch. 49, n. 30; Womersley, 1994, III, p. 98) calls him ‘a disciple of the Gallican school’.

⁴⁹ Works I have found valuable in enlarging my unspecialised understanding of this subject include Bradley and Van Kley, 2001, Aston 2002 and Printy 2009.

4 Theology and the problems of authority

(I)

The theme of chapter 21, as announced in its subheadings and early in its text, is toleration and persecution, concepts central to most of the programmes to which we have given the name Enlightenment. In previous chapters of this work,¹ however, we have discovered that these concepts were not self-existent, self-evident or self-explanatory, but phenomena new in Roman and perhaps human history, the products of a profound innovation and crisis: that is, the simultaneous and interconnected emergences of monotheism and philosophy, giving rise to problems and paradoxes that had not existed before. The Christians had been persecuted by the imperial state in the name of its own tolerance, and in consequence of their refusal to tolerate or in any way recognise the gods of the *res publica* and its *imperium*. Gibbon's predecessors and his critics had known as well as he did that these gods were the poetic creations of ancient cities, which precisely because they were myths made no statements about themselves incompatible with those made by or about others. With the advent of the one God of Heaven and Earth, however, the claim that he alone existed took on the status of truth, and the cultic observances of all other gods came to be viewed as a tissue of statements that were false about beings who were either fictions or more probably demons. The One God might have revealed himself at moments in a sacred history, or he might be the necessary consequence of metaphysical or philosophical thinking about reality and its origins; with the meeting of Athens and Jerusalem, it became not merely possible but necessary to make statements about him that were philosophically true or false, and were at the same time acts of worship of a God who was either the true God or his falsification. The believer could not tolerate false statements but must declare them to be false, and once monotheist religion became part of the structure of society there appeared bearers of public authority who must determine

¹ *RFT*, chs. 7, 9, 11.

between the true and false. Enlightenment and toleration must always entail some programmes whose aim was to exile God from the public sphere and confine him to the private, where disputes about his nature could do less damage.

The problem of toleration assumed its fully developed form, and became part of the history of the Roman empire, at the moment when Constantine, ceasing to persecute the Christian church as a republic within the empire, took the further step of declaring its religion his own and therefore a part of his authority as emperor. He did not intend to proscribe the cults of civic religion, nor did he acknowledge that he was obliging himself to regard them as the worship of demons; and he may not have yet realised that the Christians of whom he was now one were engaged in profound and bitter disputes among themselves as to the definition of the God they worshipped. His authority as emperor, and that of his successor Constantius, however, became inextricably caught up in the debate as to whether the gods of the city could be tolerated, and in the debate as to what definition of the God of the Christians was the true one and what should be done regarding definitions that were to be accounted false. The history of these entanglements is the theme of Gibbon's chapter 21, and it is indicative of the complexity of its historical moment that the first subheading used in this chapter is 'Persecution of Heresy' and the last 'Toleration of Paganism'. Of the problems the Christian empire was bringing on itself the first was a great deal more intractable than the second.

The third and fourth sentences of the chapter itself run:

The edict of Milan, the great charter of toleration, had confirmed to each individual of the Roman world, the privilege of chusing and professing his own religion. But this inestimable privilege was soon violated: with the knowledge of truth the emperor imbibed the maxims of persecution; and the sects which dissented from the Catholic church, were afflicted and oppressed by the triumph of Christianity.²

Gibbon is writing as a Whig and a parliamentarian; also as an Englishman and a Protestant. The edict of Milan is a Magna Carta; the privilege will grow into a right; and though we will soon be dealing with a church 'Catholic' in the sense of 'Trinitarian', the use of the word here invokes the memory of 'sects' persecuted because they were Protestant and the identification of the Roman Catholic Church with the fires of persecution. In fact, of course, we are looking at ancient history and the first persecutions of Christians by one another and by an imperial authority self-identified with 'Christianity' defined in one way rather than in

² Womersley, 1994, I, p. 766. 'Chusing' is Gibbon's spelling.

another. How this came about is a subject proposed as the chapter opens. It is not a simple matter and must be treated on more than one level. 'With the knowledge of truth the emperor imbibed the maxims of persecution' could of course be, and on one level is, an agnostic and tolerationist jeer at the claim to know the truth about God; but on another, it conveys the crucially important historical knowledge that it was with the advent of that claim that toleration and persecution alike became thinkable and inescapable alternatives. It was easy for Gibbon, and perhaps easier for his readers, to rest content with the simple assertion that arrogance of state and arrogance of dogmatic thinking combined to make emperors persecutors:

Constantine easily believed that the Heretics, who presumed to dispute *his* opinions, or to oppose *his* commands, were guilty of the most absurd and criminal obstinacy; and that a seasonable application of moderate severities might save those unhappy men from the danger of an everlasting condemnation.³

But no sooner has he depicted Constantine acting on these principles against the various sects he discovers infesting his provinces, than he turns about to show him acting in a contrary fashion.

Two immaterial circumstances may serve, however, to prove that the mind of Constantine was not entirely corrupted by the spirit of zeal and bigotry. Before he condemned the Manichaeans and their kindred sects, he resolved to make an accurate enquiry into the nature of their religious principles. As if he distrusted the impartiality of his ecclesiastical counsellors, this delicate commission was entrusted to a civil magistrate. The emperor was soon convinced that he had too hastily proscribed the orthodox faith and the exemplary morals of the Novatians, who had dissented from the church in some articles of discipline which were not perhaps essential to salvation. By a particular edict, he exempted them from the general penalties of the law; allowed them to build a church at Constantinople, respected the miracles of their saints; invited their bishop to the council of Nice; and gently ridiculed the narrow tenets of his sect by a familiar jest;⁴

'take a ladder and get up to heaven by yourself'; words which Gibbon says should be addressed to all sects and have been adopted in practice by most of them.⁵ Toleration is as open as bigotry to the civil authority, which may use its own judgement as to whether the behaviour or the beliefs of a particular sect endanger the civil peace. The question is which of these options the ruler will adopt, and what impels him in oscillating, as he so

³ *Ibid.* Gibbon's emphases. The words 'moderate severities' may echo the debate between Jonas Proast and John Locke's *Second* and *Third Letters on Toleration*, where Proast justifies 'moderate penalties' and Locke insists that they are 'severities'. I am indebted to John Marshall for help on this point.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 767. The concept of *adiaphora* – 'articles not necessary to salvation' – had been long in use as justifying either the exercise of civil authority or toleration.

⁵ *Ibid.*, n. 5.

often does, between them. Why does he choose to act as a believer, and can he always escape doing so? There are complex problems here, to be encountered by both late antique actors and ancient and modern historians. Gibbon was one among the latter.

(II)

Should the civil power decide what to tolerate, or withdraw from the decision as none of its business? The Novatians are no great threat to either civil or ecclesiastical authority, but it is a different matter when Constantine, and Gibbon, are obliged to deal with the more formidable Donatists of the African provinces. Here a disputed election to a bishopric has led the defeated party to claim that their opponents, having surrendered the Scriptures to pagan persecutors, are apostate and no longer members of the church; and apostasy is extended to all those who remain in communion with them, so that the party of Donatus is in danger of regarding itself as a remnant, the only true church in a fallen world. In making this potentially revolutionary claim they have acquired the support of the *circumcelliones*, a terrorist jacquerie of mountain peasants with many of the characteristics of a Christian Taliban. Gibbon does not in fact mention them at this point, but they are prominent in the account of Donatism given by Le Nain de Tillemont, with whose history Gibbon's is now to be compared.

His is in fact very brief compared with Tillemont's, though Gibbon exaggerates when he says that the latter 'has bestowed on the Donatists the greater part of a volume'.⁶ Tillemont follows the near contemporary author Optatus Milevitanus – Gibbon, like Mosheim, prefers an edition later than Tillemont's⁷ – but carries his history as far as the ordination of St Augustine, and relies heavily on the latter's many writings against the Donatists. Gibbon's curious evasiveness where Augustine is concerned begins to appear when the last quotation is continued: 'and I am indebted to him [Tillemont] for an ample collection of all the passages of his favourite St Augustin which relate to those heretics'.⁸ Gibbon's account is initially limited to the reign of Constantine, who conducts a lengthy trial 'in five successive tribunals' of the dispute between the original claimants to the bishopric of Carthage, and determines against the Donatists, whom

⁶ p. 768. In volume VI of Tillemont's *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire ecclésiastique* the history of the Donatists occupies 193 pages, that of the Arians 394, to which are added 25 on the life of Alexander bishop of Alexandria, who initiated the controversy, and 25 on the decisions of the Council of Nicaea.

⁷ p. 768, n. 6. Mosheim, 1826, vol. I, p. 325, n. m.

⁸ *Ibid.* For Gibbon on Augustine see below, pp. 382–86.

he sentences to exile. Gibbon's own judgement is oddly ambiguous and far from detailed.

As their cause was examined with attention, perhaps it was determined with justice. Perhaps their complaint was not without foundation, that the credulity of the emperor had been abused by the insidious arts of his favourite Osius. The influence of falsehood and corruption might procure the condemnation of the innocent, or aggravate the sentence of the guilty. Such an act, however, of injustice, if it concluded an importunate dispute, might be numbered among the transient evils of a despotic administration, which are neither felt nor remembered by posterity.⁹

Gibbon, who in other contexts writes with sympathy and respect of Osius of Cordova,¹⁰ does not here seem very interested in forming a judgement on Constantine's treatment of the dispute. He continues:

But this incident, so inconsiderable that it scarcely deserves a place in history, was productive of a memorable schism, which afflicted the provinces of Africa above three hundred years, and was extinguished only with Christianity itself.¹¹

Tillemont, who credits Augustine with the suppression of Donatism in Africa,¹² does not continue his narrative past Augustine's ordination as priest and his episcopate, which coincided with the conquest of Africa by the Arian Vandals;¹³ and neither he nor Gibbon in this volume goes on to the Byzantine reconquest or the invasions of the Muslim Arabs to which Gibbon points. Chapter 21 limits itself to an account of Donatist sectarian exclusivism,¹⁴ and defers even its description of the fanatic *circumcelliones* – whom Gibbon likens to the Church of the Desert in Huguenot France¹⁵ – to the rhetorical panoramas with which the chapter concludes.¹⁶ Gibbon could find little to say of Donatism, for the reason that it was a schism but not a heresy and did not raise the great theological and philosophical issues around which he was building his history. Tillemont on the other hand is clear that the Donatists

changerent leur schisme en heresie, comme dit S. Augustin, suivant la definition qu'il donne . . . parcequ'ils avoient une fausse creance tant sur les Sacremens que sur l'Eglise. Car contre l'autorité de J. C. et de toute l'Ecriture, qui nous assurent que l'Eglise Catholique est celle qui est repandue dans toute la terre, et qui ne cessera jamais d'estre visible à tout le monde, ils pretendoient qu'elle restoit refermée dans leur parti, c'est à dire dans la seule province d'Afrique . . .¹⁷

⁹ pp. 768–9. ¹⁰ pp. 807–8. His name is spelt 'Ossius' or 'Hosius' in various writings.

¹¹ p. 769. ¹² *Mémoires*, VI, p. 192.

¹³ *Mémoires*, VI, p. 1, has both 'jusques à l'épiscopat de S. Augustin' and 'jusqu'en l'an 391 que S. Augustin fut fait Prestre'.

¹⁴ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 769–70. ¹⁵ pp. 822–3. ¹⁶ pp. 821–9.

¹⁷ *Mémoires*, VI, p. 70. Spelling and accentuation as in the seventeenth-century original.

[transformed their schism into heresy, as says St Augustine following the definition he lays down . . . since they held to a false belief regarding both the Sacraments and the Church. For contrary to the authority of Christ and all Scripture, which assure us that the Catholic Church is spread through all lands and will never cease to be visible to all mankind, they claimed that it was limited to their persuasion and to the province of Africa alone,]¹⁸

thus denying the universal presence of Christ and the efficacy of his sacraments. Tillemont goes on to explain how this led to further schisms among the Donatists themselves and to the absurdity of confining the universal church to a few sectarian villages; Gibbon follows him in this.¹⁹ But the emperor Constantine is now confronted with heresy, in this case a false definition of the church he is in process of adopting as his own, and it is hard to see how he can escape supposing that his authority is involved in the dispute. He chooses, however, the strategy of toleration rather than repression, in a judgement given after his victory over Licinius and before he summons the Council of Nicaea.

Constantin par ce rescrit témoignoit une horreur extreme pour les Donatistes, comme pour de tres méchans hommes, et des ennemis de la paix Chrétienne; et néanmoins comme Dieu avoit déjà commencé à les punir, il vouloit qu'on les abandonnast à son jugement, qui ne manqueroit de chastier leur fureur; qu'on les laissast revenir d'exil, qu'on leur donnast la liberté de vivre comme ils voudroient; et qu'on ne leur imposast point d'autre peine que celle de leur propre rage . . . il valoit mieux abandonner les Donatistes à Dieu et à eux memes.²⁰

[Constantine in this rescript declared the greatest horror of the Donatists, as the worst of men and enemies of the Christian peace. Nevertheless, since God had already begun to punish them, he willed that they should be abandoned to divine judgement, which would not fail to chastise their madness; that they should be permitted to return from exile and granted the liberty to live as they wished; and that no punishment should be inflicted on them but that of their own fury . . . It was better to leave the Donatists to God and to themselves.]

Here we have toleration, conceived less as a right (though perhaps a privilege) of the individual than as a prudent decision by a magistrate concerned to preserve civil peace. Tillemont is censorious, and sees it as a weakness of Constantine's personality.²¹ Not only would it have been right for a Christian emperor to put down heresy and preserve the unity of the church, but Constantine's policy was a civil failure; the returning

¹⁸ Trans. JGAP, as are all passages in French in these chapters.

¹⁹ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 170. In n. 10, *ibid.*, Gibbon says that Tillemont 'laughs at their partial cruelty'; should this have been 'credulity'? Tillemont in fact says that Augustine 'se moque d'eux en pluieurs endroits' (*Mémoires*, VI, p. 72). Gibbon irrelevantly but significantly adds: 'He revered Augustin, the great doctor of the system of predestination.'

²⁰ *Mémoires*, VI, pp. 102, 105. ²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 45, 103, 107, 267.

Donatists appealed against the judgements that had deprived them, and when these were confirmed by commissions of bishops the emperor had set up, denounced their judges as apostates from the true church.²² Tillemont shares Gibbon's conclusion that Constantine's tolerant policy encouraged an African schism which challenged imperial authority as well as ecclesiastical, though the former might be strong enough to afford leaving the province in a state of division; but while Gibbon looks further ahead to the historical consequences of schism, Tillemont may be said to look deeper into its causes. Precisely because he considered Donatism a heresy, he enquired what options the emperor had in dealing with it. Gibbon, for whom it was doubtful whether orthodoxy should be defined at all, did not get beyond criticising Constantine for imposing despotic authority on a matter of no importance, which could only weaken it. The same difference between the historians appears as they treat a matter of far greater significance.

(III)

The schism of the Donatists was confined to Africa: the more diffusive mischief of the Trinitarian controversy successively penetrated into every part of the Christian world. The former was an accidental quarrel, occasioned by the abuse of freedom; the latter was a high and mysterious argument, derived from the abuse of philosophy.²³

The words 'mysterious' and 'mystery' will constantly recur in the pages of chapter 21, and it will be a question whether 'the abuse of philosophy' consists in the positing of mystery or in the attempt to explain it. We are about to be told how 'the genius of Plato' set up the mystery of a triune godhead that could never be fully explained, how this descended to the Christians and was transformed by them, and how it confronted them with insoluble problems in definition which shook the foundations of church and therefore of empire. This is furthermore the point, as was argued in a chapter of the preceding volume of this series,²⁴ at which Gibbon discovered means of presenting the Christian religion as a historical phenomenon around which historical narratives could be constructed; means which had eluded him in chapters 15 and 16, with far-reaching consequences for his reception and reputation. In those chapters he had set Christian belief aside without attempting to explain its character and foundation. His readers had in consequence maximised his hostility to it, and his reputation as an unbeliever writing with

²² pp. 55, 107. ²³ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 770; cf. *RFT*, p. 377.

²⁴ *RFT*, ch. 11: 'Epilogue and Prologue'.

destructive intentions was by now indelible. In chapter 21, however, he set out to explain its historical character and related its historical effects. We shall see that he did so without elaborate irony, and neither this nor any subsequent chapter was perceived as a sneer or called forth the angry refutations that had greeted his first volume.

The genius of Plato, informed by his own meditation, or by the traditional knowledge of the priests of Egypt, had ventured to explore the mysterious nature of the Deity. When he had elevated his mind to the sublime contemplation of the first self-existent, necessary cause of the universe, the Athenian sage was incapable of conceiving how the simple unity of his essence could admit the infinite variety of distinct and successive ideas which compose the model of the intellectual world; *how* a Being purely incorporeal could execute that perfect model, and mould with a plastic hand the rude and independent chaos.²⁵

The word ‘independent’ tells us we are back in the world of Beausobre;²⁶ there is no creation *ex nihilo* and chaos must be uncreated by the demiurge who moulds it.

The vain hope of extricating himself from these difficulties –

what manner of God can cause the universe to exist and be intelligible? –

which must forever oppress the feeble powers of the human mind, might induce Plato to consider the divine nature under the threefold modification of the first cause, the reason or the *Logos*, and the soul or spirit of the universe.²⁷

The Platonic trinity, a mystery which could be professed but not explicated, made its way from Athens to Alexandria, where there developed neo-Platonic schools Jewish as well as Greek. In the teachings of the former the First Cause became the Father, creator of heaven and earth, with whom the *Logos* was associated as Son and in some sense co-creator. Neo-Platonic philosophy was

insufficient to establish the truth of a mysterious doctrine, which might please, but could not satisfy, a rational mind. A prophet, or apostle, inspired by the Deity, can alone exercise a lawful dominion over the faith of mankind: and the theology of Plato might have been for ever confounded with the philosophical visions of the Academy, the Porch, and the Lycaenum, if the name and divine attributes of the *Logos* had not been confirmed by the celestial pen of the last and most sublime of the Evangelists,

who, ‘under the reign of Nerva’ and ‘about seventy years after the death of Christ’,

²⁵ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 771; emphasis Gibbon’s. ²⁶ *RFT*, ch. 5.

²⁷ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 771.

disclosed to the world the amazing secret that the LOGOS, who was with God from the beginning, and was God, who had made all things, and for whom all things had been made, was incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who had been born of a virgin, and suffered death on the cross.²⁸

It can be observed that Gibbon is not a believer and is presenting the Gospel of St John as an event in the history of the human mind, but as such he takes it seriously and is concerned to present all its implications without dismissing them as absurd; nor was he accused of doing so. The irony lies in the relations between the Christian intellect and the Christian revelation; the intellect must explore that which it can never explain, and the history of Christianity as a historical phenomenon has a beginning from this point. The relations between the three persons of a godhead Platonic and now Christian – the Spirit having become active and self-revealed on the day of Pentecost – were the subject of intense debate, in Latin as well as Greek and in west as well as east, throughout the second Christian century and perhaps before;²⁹ and the debate was no longer confined to schools and academies, but was preached in sermons to congregations including the unlearned, who might see their salvation as dependent on proper definitions of the central mysteries. With the conversion of Constantine, and his adoption of Christianity as part of his imperial authority, an essentially but inconclusively debatable theology became matter of state.

This theology, and Gibbon's treatment of it, are already Trinitarian, and it is open to the reader to believe that both arose for no better reason than that Platonic thought imposed itself on the Christian intellect. The debate Gibbon is about to study, however, has yet to turn upon definition of the Holy Ghost or Spirit as the third person of the Trinity now becoming Christian. For the next fifty years and the next six of Gibbon's chapters, all will depend upon definition of the Second Person.

The relations between (even these words are tendentious) God the Father and God the Son, and the meaning and even the validity of the term Trinity, were already the subject of long-established debate when – not long after Constantine had announced his conversion – the presbyter Arius began preaching at Alexandria that the Son was not only the subordinate but the creation or creature of the Father, and that there had been a time, even if incalculably remote, when he had not existed. This was brought to the attention of Alexander, bishop of Alexandria, who after deliberation pronounced Arius's teaching false and excluded him from

²⁸ p. 773 (Gibbon's use and capitals), and n. 21.

²⁹ Pelikan, 1971, I, ch. 4; Green, 2012, ch. 10.

the community under the bishop's jurisdiction. Gibbon relates how quickly this became more than a local disturbance;

after the edict of toleration had restored peace and leisure to the Christians, the Trinitarian controversy was revived in the ancient seat of Platonism, the learned, the opulent, the tumultuous city of Alexandria, and the flame of religious discord was rapidly communicated from the schools, to the clergy, the people, the province, and the East.³⁰

His language is replete with implications. Starting from a moment of toleration, there are means of 'rapid communication' which enlarge the controversy between Alexander and Arius into a mass division of doctrine and belief over the eastern half of the Roman empire. In an earlier chapter, Gibbon has remarked how the preaching of sermons expands doctrine into public opinion, and there are now seen to be means – letters and authoritative pronouncements – whereby members of the republic of bishops can convert doctrine into the organisation of factions. Alexander and Arius make their differences known throughout Egypt and beyond, and even after he is 'separated from the communion of the church',

the pride of Arius was supported by the applause of a numerous party. He reckoned among his immediate followers two bishops of Egypt, seven presbyters, twelve deacons, and (what may appear almost incredible) seven hundred virgins.³¹

This is the first we have encountered of Gibbon's mildly if tiresomely sexist jokes; it rests on the false assumption that the meaning of *virgo* is necessarily *intacta*.³² He continues:

A large majority of the bishops of Asia appeared to support or favour his cause; and their measures were conducted by Eusebius of Caesarea, the most learned of the Christian prelates; and by Eusebius of Nicomedia, who had earned the reputation of a statesman without forfeiting that of a saint. Synods in Palestine and Bithynia were opposed to the synods of Egypt. The attention of the prince and people was attracted by this theological dispute; and the decision, at the end of six years, was referred to the supreme authority of the general council of Nice.³³

Gibbon proceeds directly from this point to set out the problem of defining the Trinity.

When the mysteries of the Christian faith were dangerously exposed to public debate, it might be observed, that the human understanding was capable of forming three distinct, though imperfect systems, concerning the nature of the Divine Trinity; and it was pronounced, that none of these systems, in a pure and

³⁰ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 779. ³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Le Clerc (*BUH*, x, p. 422/265) more perceptively writes 'sept-cens Religieuses et par conséquent un beaucoup plus grand nombre de personnes d'entre le peuple'.

³³ pp. 779–80.

absolute sense, were exempt from heresy and error. I. According to the first hypothesis, which was maintained by Arius and his disciples, the *Logos* was a dependent and spontaneous production, created from nothing by the will of the Father. The Son, by whom all things were made, had been begotten before all worlds, and the longest of the astronomical periods could be compared only as a fleeting moment to the extent of his duration; yet this duration was not infinite, and there *had* been a time which preceded the ineffable generation of the *Logos*. . . . II. In the second hypothesis, the *Logos* possessed all the inherent, incommunicable perfections, which religion and philosophy³⁴ appropriate to the Supreme God. Three distinct and infinite minds or substances,³⁵ three co-equal and eternal beings, composed the Divine Essence; and it would have implied contradiction, that any of them should not have existed or that they should ever cease to exist. . . . III. Three Beings, who, by the self-derived necessity of their existence, possess all the divine attributes in the most perfect degree; who are eternal in duration, infinite in space, and intimately present to each other, and to the whole universe, irresistibly force themselves on the astonished mind, as one and the same being, who, in the economy of grace, as well as in that of nature, may manifest himself under different forms, and be considered under different aspects.³⁶

Gibbon has now set out three hypotheses, and at the same time heresies, defined in marginal headings as 'Arianism', 'Tritheism' and 'Sabellianism', none of which achieves the fully-articulated Trinitarianism which will appear at Nicaea. It is, strikingly, the last of the three which comes closest to it, and he proceeds to state the way in which that falls short.

By this hypothesis, a real substantial Trinity is refined into a trinity of names, and abstract modifications, that subsist only in the mind which conceives them. The *Logos* is no longer a person, but an attribute; and it is only in a figurative sense, that the epithet of Son can be applied to the eternal reason which was with God from the beginning, and by *which*, not by *whom*, all things were made. The incarnation of the *Logos* is reduced to a mere inspiration of the Divine Wisdom, which filled the soul, and directed the actions of the man Jesus.

It is relevant that this position is that seemingly adopted by Jean Le Clerc, which drew down upon him the reproach of Sabellianism.³⁷ Gibbon continues:

Thus, after revolving round the theological circle, we are surprised to find that the Sabellian ends where the Ebionite had begun, and that the incomprehensible mystery which excited our adoration, eludes our enquiry.³⁸

It is hard to read this passage as sneering derision, and we hear of no one who did so. Gibbon is an unbeliever, and does not go beyond the

³⁴ A word Gibbon can hardly be using in its Enlightened sense.

³⁵ Gibbon is introducing this crucial term for the first time in his history of Christian belief.

³⁶ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 780–1. Gibbon's emphases. ³⁷ *RFT*, p. 116. ³⁸ pp. 781–2.

incomprehensibility of the Christian mystery to accepting it by an act of faith, but neither does he utter the positivist conclusion that what cannot be spoken cannot be thought about, probably does not exist, and is not worth attention. He is a historian, not a philosopher, and is concerned with the experience and actions of those who took mystery seriously. If they became entangled in a series of intellectual disasters, it is still worth studying seriously, and even respectfully, the assumptions and mentality which led them there. The 'abuse of philosophy', identified at the outset of his account of the Arian controversy, may refer not to the proclamation of a mystery but to the attempt to explicate it. A footnote reminds us that none of the three positions outlined recognises 'the orthodox system, which is more complicated and difficult'.³⁹ It receives and deserves these epithets because it is more than a system. It represents the deliberate decision of the intellect to take the leap into mystery: to affirm and as far as possible to anticipate that which the mind can recognise but cannot articulate: the only way for the fly out of the fly-bottle of the three interlocking because unsatisfying systems. The history of the Council of Nicaea is that of the politics of debate which ensue when some have taken this leap and others are required to assent to it. The debate will polarise the republic of bishops and challenge the emperors in person.

³⁹ p. 780, n. 47.

5 Nicaea and its aftermath

(I)

To ascertain the historiographic context in which Gibbon shaped his history of the Council of Nicaea and its aftermath, it is necessary to study the early modern, and through it the ancient, historiography which he acknowledged and with which he interacted. He supplies us with one general statement.

The transactions of the Council of Nice are related by the ancients, not only in a partial, but in a very imperfect, manner. Such a picture as Fra-Paolo would have drawn, can never be recovered; but such rude sketches as have been traced by the pencil of bigotry, and that of reason, may be seen in Tillemont (*Mem. Eccles.* Tom. VI, p. 669–759) and in Le Clerc (*Bibliothèque Universelle* tom. X, p. 435–454).¹

Paolo Sarpi's history of the Council of Trent² was recognised as a classic by Protestant and Enlightened authors and readers for its almost Tacitean account of the manipulations of that council by external forces, for the most part Vatican. It was not in fact certain that the Nicene Fathers had been successfully manipulated or what agencies had been at work, but the 'bigoted' Tillemont and the 'reasonable' Le Clerc were both well aware of complex transactions behind the Council's deliberations, as were the 'ancient' historians on whom they were obliged to rely. None of these, however, had been a witness to its proceedings or had interviewed participants in them, though there were contemporary letters, manifestos and narratives – notably, and for some predominantly, the writings of Athanasius – of which they made use. The 'ancient' ecclesiastical historians were the fifth-century writers Socrates Scholasticus, Sozomen³ (Gibbon comments on the circumstance that neither was an

¹ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 782, n. 55.

² For Gibbon's knowledge of this work, see Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1259; *Library*, p. 245.

³ Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1263.

ecclesiastic⁴) and Philostorgius, unusual in his Arian sympathies but known only through an orthodox Byzantine epitome, of which there was a modern critical edition by Jacques Godefroy of the *Codex Theodosianus*.⁵ There were other ancient writers, but the early moderns, Tillemont and Le Clerc, were as aware as Gibbon was of possessing only the orthodox narrative. Tillemont of course desired to possess no other – this is what Gibbon means by ‘bigotry’ – but we shall see that this did not prevent him from supplying a detailed account of its interactions with the heterodox. All narratives, whether or not they attained a Sarpian level, were narratives of negotiation, if of negotiations doomed from the outset.

Neither Le Clerc nor Tillemont presented a full history of the Council; they wrote of it in the context of works they were constructing with other purposes. Le Clerc’s context is one considered in the preceding volume of this series:⁶ an essay on the life of Eusebius of Caesarea – both a historian and an actor in ecclesiastical history – which Le Clerc wrote and published in his review journal, the *Bibliothèque Universelle et Historique*, for the year 1688, shortly after he had informed John Locke that the latter’s *Essay on Human Understanding* had helped him set out the rules of criticism necessary for the reading of ‘les Anciens’ and especially the Fathers of the Church. Together with lives of Clement of Alexandria and Gregory Nazianzen, it was to form a volume published in England under the title *Lives of the Primitive Fathers*,⁷ and we shall see that the rules of criticism laid down by Le Clerc supplied him with the means of explaining the Council’s deliberations as history. Because it is contained within a life of Eusebius, Le Clerc’s history of the Council of Nicaea does not travel far into the history of its aftermath.

Tillemont wrote about the Council and its history in several different works. Volume VI of his *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire ecclésiastique*, to which Gibbon’s footnote refers, deals with it primarily as part of an *histoire abrogée de l’Arianisme*, numbering nearly 400 pages and continuing its story through the reign of Constantius to that of Theodosius I, but also in shorter essays on the life of Alexander of Alexandria and the decisions of the Council on questions other than Arianism.⁸ He makes it clear that the *Mémoires* are by now primarily a work of hagiography, concerned with the lives and teachings of saints, but that there are histories that should be recounted separately so that we may see how the lives of saints intersected with them.⁹ Tillemont’s awareness that there are different kinds of history

⁴ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 792, n. 84.

⁵ Womersley, 1994, III, pp. 1250–1 (Philostorgius), 1220 (Godefroy).

⁶ *RFT*, ch. 8, pp. 89–93, 100–4. ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁸ *Mémoires*, VI, p. iii, ‘Table des titres’. ⁹ *Mémoires*, VI, p. 239.

makes him a more sophisticated historian than the reliably learned antiquarian in orthodox blinkers that Gibbon describes, and his history of the Arian controversy is fuller and in some ways more perceptive than Gibbon's.

In the context supplied by Gibbon's use of it, Le Clerc's history appears so nearly identical with passages in Gibbon as to raise the question of whether it did not furnish the later writer with a model. It opens with an account of Platonic theology and the progress from the Platonic trinity to the Christian, much the same as Gibbon's,¹⁰ and goes on to a critique of patristic and pre-Nicene thought continuing the invective studied in the previous volume. 'Les Anciens', we read, failed to realise that the nature (we would say the concept) of God was so far beyond human understanding as to be 'incomprehensible' by it. Human speech, therefore, was inadequate to the uses to which the Fathers put it; it was historically conditioned, dependent on the emotions and interests of the speaker, and above all condemned to ambiguity. Since God was an absolute and speech partial, every statement concerning him must fail to distinguish itself from some other of equal but equally limited validity, thus condemning itself to contradiction. The thought of the Fathers was self-contradictory, and the attempt to cite them as authorities doubly so.

Si l'on considere qu'il s'agit ici d'une chose dont nous n'avons naturellement aucune idée, qui est même incomprehensible, supposé la révélation, et dont on ne peut parler qu'en termes métaphoriques et impropres, on ne s'étonnera pas qu'il y ait depuis le temps des Apostres divers sentimens sur cette matiere.¹¹

[If we consider that this is a matter of which we have naturally no idea, which is even incomprehensible supposing its revelation, and of which we can speak only in metaphorical and inappropriate terms, we shall not find it surprising that there have been since the time of the Apostles different ways of expressing it.¹²]

Chacun d'eux cite ses passages, qui examinez à part semblent décider pour lui; mais quand on vient à conferer ces passages les uns avec les autres, on ne peut comprendre comment les mêmes personnes ont pu parler si diversement . . . on se sent porté à croire que les Peres auroient beaucoup mieux fait de s'en tenir aux termes des Apôtres, et avouer qu'ils ne les entendoient pas, que de se jeter dans un si grand embarras, en tâchant de les expliquer.¹³

[Each man cites his texts, which taken in isolation seem decisively in his favour; but when one comes to compare these passages with one another, one cannot understand how the same authors could have spoken so differently . . . one is driven to believe that the Fathers would have done better to confine themselves to the words

¹⁰ *BUH*, 1968, x, pp. 386–98. ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 406.

¹² Trans. JGAP, as are all in this chapter and those following it. ¹³ *BUH*, 1968, x, p. 415.

of the Apostles and admit that they did not understand them, than to plunge into such great confusion in the attempt to explain them.]

This is a sceptical but not a derisive passage. The nature of God is not nonsensical, but the attempt to express it in human language is. The language in which it has been revealed is therefore mysterious and it is better to accept it as mystery. We are at the point where Gibbon declared the Trinity a mystery and every definition of it self-contradictory and leading direct to another equally ambiguous. We are also enabled to look at his statement that the Arian controversy arose from 'the abuse of philosophy'. It was philosophy that generated nonsense in the attempt to define God. Gibbon may have been indicating that this attempt would have to be given up; but it is better to read him as a historian, recording the moment in history where this dilemma arose and pointing out its historical consequences. So too Le Clerc:

*C'est là l'état des sentimens de l'Eglise Chrétienne, lorsque les querelles d'Arius la troublèrent, par où l'on peut voir qu'il n'étoit pas difficile aux deux partis de citer des autoritez des Anciens, dont les expressions equivoques pouvoient être interprétées en divers sens. L'obscurité du sujet, la vaine subtilité de l'esprit humain, qui veut tout savoir, l'envie de paroître habile, et la passion qui se mêle de toutes les disputes, firent naître ces controverses, qui déchirent malheureusement pendant long temps le Christianisme.*¹⁴

[Such was the state of mind of the Christian Church when the Arian disputes afflicted it; one can see that it was easy for both parties to cite ancient authorities, whose equivocal language could be interpreted in conflicting senses. The darkness of the subject, the vain ingenuity of the human mind, which seeks to know everything, the ambition to outshine others, and the passion generated in all disputations, gave birth to those controversies which unhappily divided Christendom for a long period.]

It is easy, and within limits correct, to read this criticism as applicable to both the Trinitarian and the anti-Trinitarian sides of the dispute touched off by the preaching of Arius. Each party, it would follow, engaged in 'the abuse of philosophy', attempting to reduce to human speech a mystery that transcended it; and there might arise the ultra-sceptical conclusion that the incomprehensible did not even exist. Gibbon might be suspected of going so far, though we have found no occasion when he was accused of actual atheism; but to pursue this possibility is to overlook the fact that the language in which he had set out the problem defines the central incomprehensible mystery as the Trinity itself, tabulates the three attempts to formulate it of which the unaided human intellect is capable as equally unsatisfactory, and therefore leaves intact the Nicene doctrine of the

¹⁴ p. 420.

Trinity as the proclamation of a mystery revealed in the Gospel according to St John. To deny or mitigate the Trinity – that is, the equality of the Son with the Father – was to deny the central mystery that could be understood only as the revelation of the Word's incarnation, and this is the reason why the Trinitarian position had to be advanced as non-negotiable. Tillemont set out the thinking behind this position.

Le demon voyant que par toute la puissance et la cruauté des hommes, il n'avoit pu maintenir l'idolatrie contre l'adoration d'un seul Dieu, établie dans toute la terre par J. C.; il travailla à le faire regner dans l'Eglise mesme, et, ce qui fait horreur, il y employa le proper nom de JESUS CHRIST, en persuadant aux Fideles que le Verbe et le Fils de Dieu, ce divin Sauveur que les Chrétiens ont toujours fait profession d'adorer, ou estoit un autre Dieu que son Pere, ou ce qui est à peu pres le mesme blaspheme, n'estoit point veritable Dieu.¹⁵

[The devil, seeing that even with the aid of the power and cruelty of men he had been unable to maintain idolatry in the face of the worship of a single God, established in all the world by Jesus Christ, sought to make it reign in the Church itself; and horrible to relate, he made use of the very name of Jesus, persuading the faithful that the Word and Son of God, that divine Saviour whom Christians have always professed to worship, was either a god other than his Father, or – what is almost the same blasphemy – no true god at all.]

Gibbon will have regarded this passage as both bigoted and superstitious; but the reality of the devil is a side issue. What matters to the Christian is that the second person of the Platonic trinity is now the Word made Flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, with whom he enjoys a salvific relationship. A philosophical proposition incompatible with this is more than a false opinion; it may affect the being of the church in and through which he conducts that relationship, and therefore affects him personally in this world and another. The paradox of the Arian controversy is that the histories record it, and surviving documents present it, as conducted in terms so Platonist and philosophical that 'the Son' is almost a technical term in the vocabulary of the schools, and is debated as such while meaning a very great deal more. Gibbon knew this to be a problem and gave it due weight; his language, however, does not suggest that he deeply felt it or shared the emotions of those who did.

(II)

Our three early modern historians – to apply that adjective to Gibbon is intentionally challenging – are agreed in saying that the Council of Nicaea

¹⁵ *Mémoires*, VI, p. 239.

was dominated by the contests between two already-formed factions, but they are neither agreed nor clear as to how these came to be formed or who if anyone controlled or led them. This lack is of course due to the absence of any single authoritative history, as well as to the circumstance – here appearing for the first time – that the aftermath, and therefore the narrative, of the Council came to be dominated by the career, personality and writings of Athanasius, so that what was written about it came increasingly to be what was written about and by him. If he was present at Nicaea, however, it was as a figure of low rank; he was no more than a deacon, and did not succeed Alexander as bishop until after the Council's dissolution. It was Alexander who had condemned Arius's doctrine of the Son and expelled him from the church, and there are accounts of how Arius set about creating a party of his supporters, in Egypt and beyond, as far as the imperial court. Far more is said about this party than about that opposed to it, though we are told that Constantine's support was at first given to the latter, and the unreliable because unorthodox historian Philostorgius affirms that Alexander met with Osius of Cordova, more than once described by Gibbon as Constantine's 'favourite',¹⁶ to concert anti-Arian measures around the principle of consubstantiality. Tillemont is cautious about this, even though it is supported by Godefroy as editor of Philostorgius. Alexander was present at Nicaea, and Gibbon thinks Osius may have presided at the Council's meetings;¹⁷ but we hear far more about the doctrine of the party which will become the orthodox, and about the tactics it chose to adopt, than we do about its leadership or composition.

As for the party supporting Arius – who does not return from the exile imposed upon him by Alexander to appear at the Council in person – there is no disagreement with Gibbon's report that its initial leaders were Eusebius of Caesarea and Eusebius of Nicomedia. Tillemont suspects that Constantine's letter rebuking Alexander and Arius for stirring up unnecessary dispute was in fact concocted by the two Eusebii¹⁸ and is the first sign of the latent Arianism, concealed behind the apparently liberal warning against the use of language too hard to explain fully. This Tillemont will always consider a sign that consubstantiality is being implicitly denied. Le Clerc was of course writing a life of Eusebius of Caesarea, and Gibbon had been questioning the latter's integrity since chapter 16.¹⁹ It was Tillemont who fastened on the figure of Eusebius of

¹⁶ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 743, n. 55, 769, 790. ¹⁷ p. 790. ¹⁸ *Mémoires*, VI, p. 228.

¹⁹ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 577, n. 178, 580–1i, 790–1, n. 80. The reliability of Eusebius as a historian of persecution had been debated between Gibbon and the critics of his sixteenth chapter. This debate had not reached the Council of Nicaea or the question of Eusebius's orthodoxy.

Nicomedia, and made him Arius's probable master in heresy, so far the leader of the party in his support that Tillemont terms it the 'Eusebian' party and distinguishes between 'les Eusebiens' and 'les Ariens' proper throughout the history of Arianism that dominates Book VI of the *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire ecclésiastique*. Tillemont's history of the controversy as a whole is more complex and far-reaching, and far more a history of doctrinal manoeuvre, than Gibbon had time or inclination to write.

The key term in the Nicene debate is 'consubstantial'; it affirms that the Son is of the same substance (ὁμοουσιος/homoousios) as the Father and therefore cannot have been created by him; if we ask why the creator necessarily creates only beings of a substance other than his own, we are led in the direction satirically described by Gibbon as 'defining the limits of omnipotence'.²⁰ The concept of substance had already a history behind it in both Greek and Latin theology, and it was possible for both Le Clerc and Gibbon to enquire whether substance (οὐσία) was synonymous with nature (Φύσις),²¹ but the historians agree that the anti-Arian and Trinitarian party adopted the assertion that the Son was of one substance with the Father, and therefore begotten not created, as the non-negotiable position that must be adopted or rejected without modification or compromise. It is Le Clerc's premise, however, that human language is such that no statement about the nature of God can be made free of ambivalence, and that this is why the Council of Nicaea was followed by a generation of bitter debate and inconclusive negotiation. Tillemont recounts its history from a standpoint precisely the opposite, and therefore narrates it in a fullness neither Le Clerc nor Gibbon attempts.

Gibbon tells the story in the following terms:

If the bishops of the council of Nice had been permitted to follow the unbiased dictates of their conscience –

he does not tell us who forbade their doing so –

Arius and his associates could scarcely have flattered themselves with the hopes of obtaining a majority of votes in favour of an hypothesis so directly adverse to the two most popular opinions of the ancient world.

He has just set out what the three possible understandings of a Trinity are, and assumes them to enjoy equal support, so that any one by itself must be outvoted.

²⁰ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 786, n. 69.

²¹ *BUH*, x, p. 383; Womersley, 1994, I, p. 783 and n. 58.

The Arians soon perceived the dangers of their situation, and prudently assumed those modest virtues which, in the fury of civil and religious dissensions, are seldom practised, or even praised, except by the weaker party. They recommended the exercise of Christian charity and moderation, urged the incomprehensible nature of the controversy, disclaimed the use of any terms or definitions which could not be found in the Scriptures, and offered, by very liberal concessions, to satisfy their adversaries without renouncing the integrity of their principles.²²

These were to be their tactics for the next thirty-five years. They were faced, however, by those for whom Jesus Christ was a presence, not a doctrine, so that doctrine must state his divinity without respect for opinions that diminished it.

The victorious faction received all their proposals with haughty suspicion, and anxiously sought for some irreconcilable mark of distinction, the recognition of which might involve the Arians in the guilt and consequences of heresy. A letter was publicly read and ignominiously torn, in which their patron, Eusebius of Nicomedia, ingenuously confessed that the admission of the *HOMOIOUSION*, or *Consubstantial*, a word already familiar to the Platonists, was incompatible with the principles of their theological systems. The fortunate opportunity was eagerly embraced by the bishops, who governed the resolution of the synod, and . . . [t]he consubstantiality of the Father and the Son was established by the council of Nice, and has been unanimously received as a fundamental article of the Christian faith by the consent of the Greek, the Latin, the Oriental, and the Protestant churches. But if the same word had not served to stigmatise the heretics and to unite the catholics, it would have been inadequate to the purposes of the majority by whom it was introduced into the orthodox creed.²³

The inherent ambiguity of theological language has not even now disappeared. Gibbon proceeds to suggest that the orthodox majority was divided into those of tritheist and Sabellian leanings, and that even Athanasius retained a soft spot for the Sabellianism of his friend Marcellus of Ancyra.²⁴ The Trinitarian persuasion is not fully self-justifying, and the two sides of the majority are obliged to tolerate one another by remaining silent.²⁵ In the Council, however, they have no other purpose than to rule as a majority, forcing the opposition into non-negotiable positions. Le Clerc tells us more than Gibbon does about the opposition's attempts to negotiate. The letter from Eusebius of Nicomedia is produced when the Arians have agreed to profess that the Son has all the characteristics of the Logos, but the majority fear that they reserve the right to believe him created by the Father. They therefore

²² Womersley, 1994, I, p. 782.

²³ pp. 782–3. Gibbon says nothing about contemporary attempts to mitigate it, though these were numerous and vocal.

²⁴ p. 784. ²⁵ p. 783.

fasten on the word *homoousios*, meaning that if the Son and Father are the same substance, the one cannot be the creature of the other, and seize upon Eusebius's letter as the occasion to break off negotiations. Eusebius of Caesarea, says Le Clerc,

resista long-temps à l'usage que l'on vouloit faire du mot *Consubstantiel*. Il proposa une autre Confession de Foy, où il étoit omis, et où il appelloit le Fils simplement *Dieu né de Dieu, lumière émanée de la lumière, vie sortie de la vie, Fils unique, premier né de toutes les creatures, engendré de son Pere avant tous les siècles*. L'Empereur approuva cette confession de Foy, et exorta les Peres du Synod de la suivre, en y ajoutant seulement le mot de *Consubstantiel*.²⁶

[long resisted the proposed use of the word Consubstantial. He proposed an alternative confession, from which it was omitted, and the Son was simply termed 'God born of God', 'light sprung of light', 'life born from life', 'sole Son', 'first-born of all creatures', 'begotten of his Father before all ages'. The Emperor approved this confession and advised the Fathers of the Council to adopt it, with the sole addition of the word Consubstantial.]

Constantine is shown intervening, of his own volition if perhaps at the advice of some counsellor, and endeavouring to construct a formula containing language acceptable to both parties. This confession is in fact adopted, and subscribed by all present, Eusebius justifying himself by stating that the Son existed before he was begotten

en puissance dans son Pere d'une manière non-engendré; le Pere aient été toujours Pere . . . toutes choses en puissance étant éternellement dans le même état.

Il semblera peut-être que c'est là le pur Arianisme, et que c'est nier l'éternité du Fils; mais il faut remarquer que dans le style de ce temps là exister avant le monde et être éternel c'est là même chose.²⁷

[potentially in his Father in a manner non-begotten; the Father having always been Father . . . all things in potentiality being eternally in the same state of being.

It may seem, perhaps, that this is pure Arianism and amounts to denial of the eternity of the Son; but we must remember that in the language of these times to exist before the world and to exist eternally are the same thing.]

Whatever we are to think of Eusebius of Caesarea's intellectual integrity, Le Clerc's explanation reminds us both that language is historically unstable, and that its inherent ambivalence constantly frustrated the attempts of the orthodox majority to impose a non-negotiable conclusion. No formula could be found that might not be adopted with reservations, and the majority, the minority and the emperor all knew this. The Council ended as a success in formulating a lasting catholic doctrine, a failure in

²⁶ BUH, x, p. 443. ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 445. Le Clerc's emphases.

bringing about unity in the church. Le Clerc supplied a Tacitean conclusion.

C'est ainsi que finit ce célèbre Concile, dont les circonstances nous seroient mieux connûes, si la crainte d'offenser des personnes puissantes, la zele des uns, la passion des autres, et la respect qui la posterité a eu pour les décisions d'une si fameuse assemblée, n'eussent empêché les Auteurs contemporains d'en écrire l'histoire, avec l'exactitude et le desinterressement que l'on remarque dans les véritables Historiens, et retenu ceux qui ont vécu depuis, d'en dire ce qu'ils en savoient peut-être de desavantageux.²⁸

[Such was the end of this renowned council, of which we should know the history better if the fear of offending powerful figures, the zeal of some, the passions of others, and posterity's respect for the decisions of so famous an assembly, had not prevented contemporary authors from writing its history with the exactitude and impartiality we see in the true historians, and discouraged those who lived afterwards from saying what they may have known to its discredit.]

It is Gibbon's lament for the lack of a late antique Sarpi, and indeed there is not much narrative that takes us behind the scenes of the Council's deliberations and decisions; but a clear narrative of its politics has nevertheless emerged. We have seen how the majority adopted the keyword 'consubstantial' to impose a position that could not be negotiated, and how the structure of language itself combined with the adroitness of the Arian principals to make non-negotiability impossible. It is this that provides the ecclesiastical history of the next thirty-five years, which Gibbon must find means of narrating in his own way.

(III)

Le Clerc's essay ends with the life of his subject, Eusebius of Caesarea; but as the latter's death occurred two years after that of the emperor Constantine, Le Clerc must narrate the first moves in the complex history of ecclesiastical and doctrinal politics that began with Constantine's apparent change of front not long after the Council of Nicaea, and continued through the reign of his son Constantius. Of our three historians, it is Tillemont, chiefly in his *Histoire abrogée de l'Arianisme*, who provides a sequential interpretative narrative of this history to the death of Constantius. Gibbon's by comparison is highly compressed and organised in a way that makes it difficult to see how the remainder of chapter 21 was constructed. The historian of historiography – who is not identical

²⁸ p. 542.

with the historian of late antiquity or of theology – needs to understand how this came about.

From his account of the proceedings at Nicaea Gibbon goes on:

The authority of a general council, to which the Arians themselves had been compelled to submit, inscribed on the banners of the orthodox party the mysterious characters of the word *Homoousion*, which essentially contributed, notwithstanding some obscure disputes, some nocturnal combats, to maintain and perpetuate the uniformity of faith, or at least of language. The Consubstantialists, who by their success have deserved and obtained the title of Catholics, gloried in the simplicity and steadiness of their own creed, and insulted the repeated variations of their adversaries, who were destitute of any certain rule of faith. The sincerity or the cunning of the Arian chiefs, the fear of the law or of the people, their reverence for Christ, their hatred of Athanasius, all the causes, human and divine, that influence and disturb the counsels of a theological faction, introduced among the sectaries a spirit of discord and inconstancy, which in the course of a few years erected eighteen different models of religion, and avenged the violated dignity of the church.²⁹

This passage is to say the least loaded in favour of the orthodox, and it is hard to discover in it any implicit irony at the expense of the catholic position. Gibbon goes on, however, to a long quotation from the orthodox Hilary of Poitiers, whose grief at the incessant multiplication of theological niceties makes him, says Gibbon, ‘deviate into the style of a Christian philosopher’ and places him ‘in the philosophical society of Bayle and Plutarch’.³⁰ But the name of Bayle is the sole hook on which to hang an implicit rejection of Christian theology as a whole, and Gibbon goes on:

It will not be expected, it would not perhaps be endured, that I should swell this theological digression by a minute explanation of the eighteen creeds, the authors of which, for the most part, disclaimed the odious name of their parent Arius. It is amusing enough to delineate the form, and to trace the vegetation, of a singular plant; but the tedious detail of leaves without flowers, and of branches without fruit, would soon exhaust the patience and disappoint the curiosity of the laborious student.³¹

Gibbon is still using Hilary to display the sterility and fragmentation of the Arian position, leaving to the orthodox the firm and simple assertion of the central mystery, of which Athanasius will be the narrative hero. What at first escapes the eye of the reader is that these passages pass over, and leave apparently unnarrated, a very complex history of thirty years of theological negotiation and imperial intervention, that begins with the summoning of the Council of Nicaea in 325, covers the whole reign of Constantius (326–61), and will be interrupted only by the accession of

²⁹ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 784. ³⁰ p. 785 and n. 65. ³¹ *Ibid.*

Julian. Athanasius and Tillemont, Gibbon's ancient and modern sources for the eighteen sects into which the Arians are said to have fragmented, defer the history of this disintegration until they have recounted the Council of Rimini in 360, when the churches of the empire's west and east were induced to accept a confession at least nominally Arian – if that term retained by then any unity of meaning. Tillemont narrates this history as a sequence of events, which he seeks to render intelligible; Gibbon says he is digressing from it, but it is a question whether he has narrated it. Before exploring that question, it may be well to examine what Tillemont says.

Tillemont is intolerantly orthodox, or in Gibbon's language 'bigoted'. The orthodox are right and their opponents are wrong; both heretics and hypocrites, since they deny the Son they pretend to worship. This does not close off his thinking about them, however, or prevent his having problems in understanding them; in fact, it may sharpen his analysis, since there are several ways of being wrong and these interact with one another. He early asks the question whether Arius or Eusebius of Nicomedia was the leader of the heresy that bore the former's name. They had been students together, and possibly Eusebius had been Arius's master and the author of his error.³² It is not long before the language of the ancient sources (who come to include Athanasius) opens up a distinction between Arius, the simple-minded fanatic, and Eusebius, the ecclesiastical politician, courtier, and possibly rival for the imperial favour with Osius of Cordova; and this becomes a problematic distinction between an 'Arian' and a 'Eusebian' party: the former – especially after Arius's death – a sect of purists insistent on his teaching alone, the latter persisting – even after the death of Eusebius – in promoting any and every way of mitigating or obscuring the doctrine of consubstantiality which is 'la Foy de Nicée'. The concept of a 'Eusebian party' is maintained until as late as the Council of Milan in 355, but it is as persistently maintained that their theology was always 'Arian' in some sense laid down by Arius and Eusebius thirty years before. The anti-consubstantialist strategies, however, have become so many and various that it may be doubted whether 'Arian' has not become a portmanteau term, as if any mitigation of the Son's consubstantiality must be the first step towards reducing him to a creature.

The story now becomes one of manoeuvre and negotiation, based on the Leclercian ambivalence of language, in which the orthodox seek to pin down the heretics, forcing them to accept or reject a non-negotiable

³² *Mémoires*, VI, pp. 253–4.

position, and the latter constantly offer terms on which they can accept it, only to be suspected (probably rightly) of accepting it with reservations that leave their heresy concealed but intact. We have seen this going on in Le Clerc's account of the concluding sessions of the Council of Nicaea, and it continues in his narrative and in that of every other historian, as they relate Constantine's conduct in the remaining ten years of his reign.

Gibbon concurs with Tillemont that the emperor may never have fully understood what was at stake in matters of theology. Tillemont ascribes to him 'une facilité, pour ne pas dire une legereté d'esprit tout extraordinaire' in his willingness to be reconciled with Eusebius;³³ and Gibbon suggests that he never fully understood the issues before him.³⁴

A reading of Tillemont, however, makes it clear that Arius was declaring himself willing to accept the Nicene formula without compromising his own beliefs, and that Constantine was anxious to believe him and see him restored to communion; and that the apparent change in the emperor's sentiments arose from anger with Athanasius (when the latter's behaviour came to be a political issue) for insisting that Arius was a hypocrite whose professions of orthodoxy could not be trusted. It is a problem for the twenty-first-century reader that neither Gibbon nor Tillemont seems to entertain the thought that Constantine, and Constantius after him, were *politique* rulers, in search of a compromise formula which competing ecclesiastics might be induced or compelled to accept for the sake of civil order.

The story becomes complex and confusing, and Gibbon's way of dealing with it is scarcely narrative. After Nicaea, Constantine is moved to send both Arius and Eusebius of Nicomedia into exile; at the same time Athanasius succeeds Alexander as bishop of Alexandria at a surprisingly young age, and has enemies who accuse him of various crimes. Constantine assembles a council, meeting at Tyre and Jerusalem, at which Eusebius of Caesarea presides but which Athanasius refuses to attend. He confronts the emperor in person, leading the latter to suspect him of contumacy. Tillemont says that this refusal was Athanasius's greatest offence in Constantine's eyes, but that it was moved by the belief that the council would be composed of bishops friendly to Arius and the exiled Eusebius.³⁵ Subsequently and partly in consequence, Constantine begins to work towards recalling the exiles and bringing them back into the communion of the church. It is at this point that all three of our historians give accounts of the emperor's motivation which do not include

³³ *Mémoires*, VI, p. 267. Similar judgements are given of his dealings with the Donatists; pp. 103, 107.

³⁴ See below, n. 37. ³⁵ *Mémoires*, VI, pp. 297–8.

the suggestion that he was acting as a statesman, in search of a theological compromise which would end dissensions among his bishops and the unwelcome pressures these brought to bear on him. All three repeat accounts given by the ancient sources in which the emperor's sister Constantia and his son Constantius join with advisers of a 'Eusebian' persuasion to bring him into favouring positions more 'Arian' than 'Nicæan'. There begins to be mention of a secret adviser,³⁶ apparently a priest but forever nameless, who suggests that Constantine will find it possible to reconcile Arius with the Nicene decrees, and Eusebius of Nicomedia is recalled from his exile. No historian seems to entertain the thought that Constantine knew what he was doing, and Gibbon's last word on him runs:

The ecclesiastical government of Constantine cannot be justified from the reproach of levity and weakness. But the credulous monarch, unskilled in the stratagems of theological warfare, might be deceived by the modest and specious professions of the heretics, whose sentiments he never perfectly understood; and while he protected Arius, and persecuted Athanasius, he considered the council of Nice as the bulwark of the Christian faith, and the peculiar glory of his own reign.³⁷

The critical Le Clerc and the sceptical Gibbon concur with the orthodox Tillemont in holding that Constantine wavered from the orthodox faith because he was being manipulated by heretic counsellors. All three, however, and especially Tillemont, show him in person laying the Nicene articles before Arius, and asking him whether he can swear before God that he subscribes to them. Arius replies that he can; but Tillemont is apparently supported by Le Clerc in insisting that this reply was deceitful. 'Cette confession', he says of one of the Arian manifestos,

ne paroissoit avoir rien que de Catholique dans les termes, mais elle cachoit un sens heretique, estant composée de telle sorte qu'elle pouvoit exprimer et la Foy, et l'heresie ... Cependant Rufin³⁸ nous assure qu'elle fut cause qu'une partie des sectateurs d'Arius l'abandonnerent, et ne voulurent plus communiquer avec luy depuis son rappel, soutenant qu'il falloit dire hautement, ou plutost impudemment, Que le Fils n'estoit pas né, mais fait et formé du neant.³⁹

[This confession ... seemed to contain nothing not Catholic in its language, but it concealed a heretical meaning, being couched in such terms that it could express both the Faith and heresy ... Yet Rufinus affirms that it was the reason why a fraction of Arius's followers abandoned him, and desired no further communion

³⁶ *Ibid.* (heading to ch. xxvi); pp. 301–2. The ecclesiastical historians from Socrates to Rufinus join in mentioning him. The common source may be Athanasius.

³⁷ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 792.

³⁸ For his impact on ecclesiastical historiography see Barnes 1993, p. 7.

³⁹ *Mémoires*, VI, pp. 272–3.

with him after his recall, maintaining that it must be said openly – or rather shamelessly – that the Son was not begotten but made and formed out of nothing.]

Le Clerc says that Arius was prepared to confess

*Que le Fils étoit né du Pere avant tous les siècles, et que la Raison,*⁴⁰ *qui est Dieu, avoit fait toutes choses, tant dans le ciel que sur la terre.* Si Constantin fut véritablement satisfait de cette déclaration il faut qu'il eût ou changé de sentiment, ou qu'il n'y apportât guère d'attention, ou qu'il eût peu compris le sens du Symbole de Nicée.⁴¹

[that the Son was begotten by the Father before all ages, and that reason, which is God, had made all things in heaven as in earth. If Constantine was indeed satisfied by this declaration, it must follow either that he had changed his convictions, or that he had paid it little attention, or that he had not well understood the creed of Nicaea.]

It is the problem of language again, forcing the purist into perpetual suspicion or separation. After a final interview – in which even Tillemont cannot bring himself to believe that Arius held one declaration in his hand while swearing to another concealed in his armpit⁴² – Constantine orders his readmission to communion; but at this moment of triumph Arius drops dead, in 'strange and horrid circumstances' which Gibbon suggested would have to be ascribed either to poison or to miracle.⁴³ Maclaine the translator of Mosheim opted for poison,⁴⁴ but Tillemont thinks there was divine judgement at work; Arius suffered the fate of Judas for a comparable offence against Christ.⁴⁵ That Constantine and Arius might genuinely have been seeking a politic accommodation does not seem to have occurred even to Gibbon. The reason may lie in the history of the next reign.

⁴⁰ *RFT*, pp. 115–16, for Le Clerc's willingness to use *ratio/raison* as a translation of Logos, with the consequences mentioned by Gibbon as Sabellian (above, ch. 4, n. 36).

⁴¹ *BUH*, x, p. 458. ⁴² *Mémoires*, vi, p. 295.

⁴³ Womersley, 1994, i, p. 791 and n. 83; 'his bowels suddenly burst out in a privy'.

⁴⁴ Maclaine, 1826, i, pp. 373–4, n. γ. (the Greek *gamma*).

⁴⁵ *Mémoires*, vi, pp. 295–6. He gives physical details as untranslatable as they are unacceptable. It will be recalled that Judas 'burst asunder in the midst and his bowels gushed out' (Acts 1:18).

6 The reign of Constantius and the Arian triumph

(I)

From the death of Arius, followed by that of Constantine a year or so later, Tillemont, and Gibbon following him, confronted a new set of problems in the history of what they continued to call 'Arianism'. Eusebius of Nicomedia was recalled from exile, and it was he who performed the baptism of Constantine shortly before the emperor's death. It seemed necessary to Tillemont, and there is no sign that Gibbon thought otherwise,¹ to call the party in ecclesiastical politics which opposed or sought to modify the decrees of the Council of Nicaea 'the Eusebian party', while continuing to insist that its theology was fundamentally 'Arian', evidently on the premise that any modification of the term 'consubstantial' could not be stopped short of declaring the Son the creature of the Father. Constantine and Arius had been engaged in a negotiation, seeking a formula to which the latter could subscribe while leaving consubstantiality, at least apparently, uncompromised; but there was a party of hard-core Nicaeans (of whom Athanasius came to be both the symbol and the leader) who held consubstantiality to be the proclamation of the essential Christian mystery, so that to negotiate it at all was to depart in the direction of denying the Son's divinity. It was the party seeking to continue to negotiate it that Tillemont (and Gibbon) termed both 'Eusebian' and 'Arian'; but the meaning of these terms, and their junction, called for explanation.

The historians do not opt for the simple hypothesis that the adoption of a 'Eusebian' policy was decided on by the emperors, Constantine and Constantius after him, for simply *politique* reasons, or on the advice of Eusebius of Nicomedia. We have heard Gibbon on the credulity of Constantine, and Tillemont says that Constantius

¹ Such terms as 'the Eusebian interest', 'banner', 'faction' and 'the Eusebians' may be found in Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 786, 788, 800, 801.

estoit un esprit assez foible, que se laissoit aisément emporter et gouverner par ceux qui le flatoient. Il ne laissoit point avec cela d'estre fier, d'aimer à dominer, et de vouloir agir en toutes choses comme maistre et souverain, mesme dans les affaires de l'Eglise. Voilà la cause des maux extremes que l'Eglise souffroit sous son regne.²

[was of a weak understanding, easily overborne and governed by flatterers. This did not keep him from pride and the love of power, or from acting as lord and master even in the affairs of the Church. Such was the cause of the great evils which the Church suffered under his reign.]

Many times echoed by Gibbon, this is the classic portrait of the palace tyrant, despotic in power but weak and pliable in council. For Gibbon of course there is a further dimension: the emperors are faced by new and incomprehensible problems, and cannot help acting despotically because they do not understand what they are doing. Neither Tillemont nor Gibbon entertains the possibility that they might apply their intelligence to bringing the problems of theology under the control of reason of state. There is no Constantinian equivalent to Voltaire's Henri IV.³

Tillemont and Gibbon speak regularly of 'the Eusebian party', but do not regard the powerful politician Eusebius of Nicomedia, of whom we have heard so much, as its principal founder. As well as Constantia and Constantius himself, there is the unknown priest mentioned by all the ecclesiastical historians, of whom Tillemont says (echoed by Gibbon⁴):

Il deploioit avec une douleur feinte la tempeste dont l'Eglise estoit agitée, et il pretendoit que ce mal n'avoit point d'autre cause que la malice de ceux qui avoient introduit dans l'Eglise le mot de Consubstantiel qui ne se trouvoit point dans l'Ecriture, condamnant ainsi directement le grand Concile de Nicée, et faisant en cela ce que personne n'eust osé faire du vivant de Constantin. Il passoit de là à condamner S. Athanase, et les autres saints Prelates de l'Eglise; en quoy Eusebe de Nicomedie, Theognis, et Theodore d'Heraclee, ne manquent pas de le seconder.⁵

[He lamented with assumed grief the tempest by which the Church was tormented, and claimed that this evil had no other cause than the malice of those who had introduced into it the word Consubstantial, nowhere to be found in Scripture; so that he directly condemned the great Council of Nicaea, as none had dared to do in the lifetime of Constantine. He went on to condemn St Athanasius and other holy prelates of the Church, in which Eusebius of Nicomedia, Theognis, and Theodore of Heraclea did not fail to support him.]

Among the instruments of this master plotter, never identified, is yet another Eusebius, a chamberlain active in the domestic politics of the palace. He is a eunuch, and the familiar invective against this caste of

² *Mémoires*, VI, p. 300. ³ See *NCG*, p. 149. ⁴ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 792.

⁵ *Mémoires*, VI, p. 301. Cf. p. 381.

unnatural beings – ‘cette espece d’hommes ou de femmes’⁶ – represents them as keeping alive the Eusebian party and its Arian heresy. Gibbon cites Athanasius as remarking that eunuchs ‘are the natural enemies of the Son’,⁷ and Tillemont goes further.

Ainsi ce furent eux qui causerent tous les maux que l’Eglise souffrit alors, dignes certes d’estre les protecteurs de l’heresie Arienne, et les ennemies de la divine fecondité du Pere eternel.⁸

[So these it was who brought about all the ills the Church suffered in those days, worthy as they were to be protectors of the Arian heresy, and enemies of the divine fecundity of the eternal Father.]

Gibbon, who must have seen this passage, does not comment on it, which is perhaps as well. It is of course to be read as reflecting the Nicene insistence that the Father begets the Son, but does not create him.

From this point it is possible to follow in Tillemont – and at removes in Gibbon – a complex and eventful narrative covering the whole reign of Constantius to the unexpected advent of Julian. It recounts how a party termed ‘Eusebian’, either supported by the emperor or carrying him uncomprehending along with it, seeks to mitigate, but not immediately to oppose, the Nicene proclamation of consubstantiality, by proposing definitions of the Son’s divinity that may be reconciled with it and win the support of the church at large. Tillemont recounts this story from a standpoint rigidly orthodox, not to say with Gibbon ‘bigoted’, which regards the Nicene formula as non-negotiable, so that any proposed compromise is a step on the slippery slope leading to the Arian position that the Son was created. Since, however, this condemnation is predetermined, he is not inhibited from stating what any compromise was in order to show how it was wrong, so that he presents a narrative of negotiation and conflict between opposed positions, very likely unreliable but nevertheless a history. As we shall see, Gibbon was not able to present any other history, and the most he (and we) can say is that we have no history written from the ‘Eusebian’ or ‘Arian’ point of view – that of the unorthodox Philostorgius having been edited and epitomised by orthodox hands.⁹ Tillemont’s narrative can, however, be critically read and contains information, and is the work of a mind thinking historically even when in orthodox blinkers.

Constantius, even if a puppet, is a central figure. Constantine’s empire is taken over by his three sons, as we have already seen,¹⁰ and the division of the empire, so crucial to the *Decline and Fall*, now begins to be a division

⁶ *Ibid.* ⁷ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 792, n. 85. ⁸ *Mémoires*, v, p. 302.

⁹ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 779, 786, 787; II, p. 32, n. 40. ¹⁰ Above, p. 47.

of the church as well. Constantius commands the eastern provinces; perhaps under 'Eusebian' management, the eastern bishoprics command him; while his brothers, Constantine II in the west and Constans in the Italo-Illyrian centre, find themselves at the head of a largely Latin-speaking clergy unwilling to be led in anti-Nicene directions by the voluble theologians of the Greek-speaking east. The 'Eusebian' attempt to unify the church around some modification of Nicene consubstantiality thus encounters difficulties that prefigure though they do not yet produce the historic division of Christendom into Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox. In this prehistory the bishop of Rome must play some part. The Petrine supremacy, as central to Protestant and Enlightened authors who rejected it as to Catholics who upheld it, need not have been asserted by popes (the title is used sparingly) who led western opposition to being caught up in Eusebian theological politics; but ancient as well as modern historians have increasingly more to say about occasions when 'western' and 'eastern' councils took opposed views and even declined to meet together. When we return to Gibbon's version of the narrative, we shall see what significance this had for him. To Tillemont, meanwhile, it is important that the Donatists of Africa remained Trinitarian though schismatic, so that the two great heresies never formed a common front.¹¹

The ecclesiastical issues become imperial when the western emperors find themselves the protectors or advocates of Athanasius, repeatedly exiled from his bishopric of Alexandria by his various enemies – Eusebians among them – but possessed of a political genius for making himself the symbol of the Trinitarian cause. In his first exile he resides at Trier, the western capital, and is known to Constantine II; in his second, after that emperor's death, he repairs to Rome and enlists support from its bishop and from Constans, now ruling the western as well as the central provinces.¹² His claims to restoration form part of the issues dividing both church and empire and Constans is moved to threaten his eastern brother with military action if they are not met; but there is much going on in these years (340–350) in which he is not the sole figure. In the summary version of Tillemont's and Gibbon's narrative presented here, these are the years in which the Homoiousion is offered as an alternative to, or compromise with, the Homoousion; that is, the Son is to be of like but not identical substance with the Father. Are these definitions to be opposed to one another, or to offer associated paths towards the ultimately incomprehensible mystery?

¹¹ *Mémoires*, VI, pp. 107–9.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 302. 'les deux Empereurs d'Occident, Constantin et Constant, demeurèrent toujours très attachés à la foi de l'Eglise Catholique'.

Gibbon sees that this is a serious matter, and that jokes about disputes over a diphthong miss the point.¹³

Hopes that the two positions may converge are slow to die, but are frustrated, not only by the inherent ambiguity of language, but by the opposition between two radicalisms. There are, predictably, the hard-core (or Athanasian) Nicenes, who hold any redefinition of consubstantiality to be inherently 'Arian'; but their fears are confirmed by the emergence of a position known as 'anomoian'¹⁴ as distinct from 'homoian', because it rejects the concept of substance altogether, both as unknown to Scripture (this we have met already) and as philosophically untenable. To a modern eye the shadow of Hobbes (never mentioned by Gibbon) falls across the page, but fourth-century history presents the figure of a certain Aetius, whose career as a Christian resembles that of a wandering Cynic philosopher, while his readiness to adopt a critical stance towards any hypothesis suggests an ancient equivalent of John Toland and earns him the epithet of 'the Atheist'.¹⁵ His appearance will help fragment the 'Arian' persuasion into the eighteen jarring sects earlier noticed by Gibbon;¹⁶ more immediately, the appearance of 'anomoianism' complicates the negotiations to be carried out by clerics claiming to act on behalf of the emperor Constantius.

(II)

This ultimately intractable opposition between a non-negotiable theology and questionably sincere offers to negotiate with it goes on against a background of increasing division between eastern and western empire and Church. Constantius controls the Greek-speaking east, Constantine the Latin west; such line of division as can be found runs (as it does for centuries after) somewhere through eastern Illyria. It is observed by all historians that the Latin clergy prefer to maintain the Nicene position, less because they are convinced of it than because they do not wish to debate it; the problems of divine substance require the niceties of the Greek language, and these have yet to be replicated in Latin. Gibbon of course employs this in order to formulate a Leclercian criticism. Constantine in the west makes himself the protector of Athanasius, and so on the whole do

¹³ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 787; though Gibbon here declares that the semi-Arian position is virtually indistinguishable from the Catholic.

¹⁴ There are several spellings of this term. Tillemont's is 'anoméen', and Barnes 1993 renders it 'anomean' as distinct from 'homoean'. I have chosen 'anomoian' in order to emphasise the suggestion that there are no *nomoi* or criteria which the mind might apply to the nature of God.

¹⁵ For Gibbon's account of him, see Womersley, 1994, I, p. 786. ¹⁶ pp. 784–5.

the bishops of Rome. Here we are reminded that Tillemont is as firm a supporter as a Jansenist can be (and Fleury as a Gallican can be) of papal authority and the Petrine supremacy, and is ready to present the papacy (the word 'pope' is not specifically prominent) as the defender of Trinitarian orthodoxy against eastern heresy. Paradoxically – and for reasons to be considered later – the same is true of Gibbon.

The scenario in which Constantius and Constans call councils which refuse to meet, anathematise one another, and examine formulae which the consubstantialists reject, is destroyed by the revolt of Magnentius and the death of Constans. Gibbon, who has already related these events as imperial history, is now obliged to return to them as ecclesiastical history; Tillemont, telling the latter story, need only mention occasions on which Danubian or Persian warfare requires Constantius to turn away from a church he now rules to an empire unified by his defeat of Magnentius. As we have seen, this was achieved by battle at Mursa on the Danube in 350, and Gibbon has earlier mentioned in a footnote that 'the emperor passed the day in prayer with Valens, the Arian bishop of Mursa, who gained his confidence by announcing the success of the battle'.¹⁷ Gibbon defers till late in chapter 21 the information, important throughout to Tillemont, that this Valens has been, since the Council of Tyre in the reign of Constantine, the collaborator of another Pannonian bishop, Ursacius of Singidunum, in manoeuvres leading to the first exile of Athanasius, who thought them the disciples of Arius.¹⁸ They have been active in several councils held under Constantius, proposing theological positions which either suggest a reconciliation with the Nicene decrees by offering the similarity (*homoiousios*) of the Son's substance instead of its identity (*homoousios*) with the Father, or venture on a more radical reconciliation by proposing that the concept of substance be given up altogether, as unscriptural as well as unmanageable. This is the 'anomoian' position, generally perceived as 'Arian' in the sense that if the Son is altogether dissimilar to the Father he must be the latter's creation. At the Councils of Serdica (343) and Sirmium (351) formulae are suggested which the western bishops instantly reject (such as that put forward by the westerner Potamius of Lisbon, according to which the Word of the Father combines with the blood of Mary to beget the Son in her womb).¹⁹ Potamius is working with Ursacius and Valens, and the determination of the eastern bishops to impose a solution is going beyond reconciliation, as the Latins perceive.

¹⁷ p. 679, n. 84. ¹⁸ They first appear in Tillemont at *Mémoires*, vi, p. 286.

¹⁹ *Mémoires*, vi, p. 417. This is seen as anticipating the Nestorian and Eutychian debates of the next century.

By the time of Sirmium, Constantius has destroyed the power of Magnentius and is empowered, or obliged, to impose a settlement on the church as a whole (Donatist Africa being left out of account). Ancient and early modern historians are at one in declining to allow Constantius any policy of his own, but if he is being controlled by ecclesiastical counsellors it is desirable to know who these were. Eusebius of Nicomedia has died in 341 and not much has been heard of him since the accession of Constantius, but it is still acceptable to speak of 'Eusebians' and 'the Eusebian party'. Ursacius and Valens do not simply take his place, but are leading figures in orthodox accounts (Gibbon's may be included) of what the anti-Nicene party is doing in the last decade of Constantius's reign. Three great if questionable councils, at Sirmium in 351, at Milan in 357 and Rimini in 360, provide Tillemont with the opportunity, or the obligation, to make himself clear.

Je pense que selon ce que l'histoire nous en peut apprendre, ce fut premierement dans ce Concile de Milan que les Eusebiens se declarerent ouvertement pour les dogmes impies de l'Arianisme, et travaillerent à les faire recevoir par toute l'Eglise. Ils decouvriront donc enfin le dessein qu'ils avoient formé depuis tant d'années, et qu'ils avoient tasché de deguiser tant qu'ils ne s'estoient cru assez forts pour le faire réussir. Ils avoient travaillé à effacer le Concile de Nicée par divers formulaires equivoques qui n'estoient ni Catholiques ni ouvertement Ariens. Ils avoient fait tous leurs efforts pour accabler par divers pretextes les défenseurs de la foy de la Consubstantialité, et de la divinité du Verbe. Mais en cette occasion, ils ne se cacherent plus, selon que les auteurs en disent. Constance qui estoit leur organe, osa soutenir que la secte d'Arius estoit Catholique; et ils publierent sous son nom un edit impie qui contenoit tout le venin de l'Arianisme, pour obliger les Evesques à le recevoir. Nous pouvons donc maintenant sans scrupule traiter ces ennemis de l'Eglise non plus d'Eusebiens, mais d'Ariens, puis qu'ils faisoient ouvertement profession d'Arianisme; et c'est le nom que nous leur donnerons dans la suite: Aussibien il n'y aura plus guere de necessité de les distinguer des anciens Ariens chassez de l'Eglise avec Arius par S. Alexandre et par le Concile de Nicée.²⁰

[I consider that according to what history can teach us of the matter, it was at the Council of Milan that the Eusebians for the first time declared openly for the impious dogmas of Arianism and worked to have them received by the whole Church. At last they disclosed the design which they had formed so many years before, and had sought to disguise as long as they were not strong enough to carry it out. They had laboured to annul the Council of Nicaea by sundry equivocal formularies neither Catholic nor openly Arian. They had directed all their endeavours towards overcoming by various devices the defenders of the Consubstantial faith and the divinity of the Word. But this time they no longer concealed themselves, according to what the authorities tell us. Constantius, who was their mouthpiece, ventured to maintain that the Arian sect was Catholic; and under

²⁰ pp. 364–5.

his name they published an impious edict that contained all the poison of Arianism, in order to compel the bishops to accept it. We may then from this time unhesitatingly call these enemies of the Church no longer Eusebians but Arians, since they professed Arianism openly; and such is the name we shall give them from now on. Consequently there will be little need to distinguish them from the original Arians expelled from the Church with Arius by St Alexander and the Council of Nicaea.]

This is repeated at length in a later chapter,²¹ where we learn that the original Arians not only condemned the hypocrisy of Eusebius and his party, but separated from Arius himself, when by a false confession of faith he entered into communion with those who subscribed to the Nicene formula. It is the concept of hypocrisy that repays examination. Tillemont is persuaded that any attempt to reconcile the Nicene and Arian positions must result in the implicit subversion of the former, perhaps under the cloak of renewed communion between the two parties. He therefore insists that the 'Eusebians' were always Arians at heart, and comes close to saluting the original Arians for their honesty in recognising that there can be no stopping point short of the definition of the Son as a creature. But from the last years of Constantine's reign to the last years of his successors, the history he has to recount is a history of hypocrisy: that is, of 'Eusebian' attempts to provide a formula that conceals its inescapable Arianism but to which the consubstantialist orthodox can be induced to subscribe. The central thread of this history is the *homoiousion*, the proposition that the Son is of like substance with the Father, and the attempt to define likeness so that it becomes indistinguishable from identity. This is still going on at Sirmium, Milan and Rimini, and there are orthodox theologians, like Hilary of Poitiers, prepared to search for reconciliation between the two. Tillemont is unshakable, however, and Athanasius was equally so. The mask is stripped from the Eusebian strategy by the appearance of the frightening figure of Aetius, leader of an 'anomoian' faction which not only repudiated the very idea of substance, but employed Aetius's skill as a logician and dialectician to undermine any language in which the Father and Son might be spoken of together. In a sense we have returned to Le Clerc's insistence that language is ambivalent and inoperable, and it is worth remarking what Tillemont has to say about Aetius.

Pour ses heresies, il n'en avoit en effet point d'autres que celles des Ariens, en ayant seulement mieux penetré et mieux suivi les consequences, et ayant dit avec plus d'étendue ce qui estoit enfermé dans leurs principes impies. Neanmoins par une justice visible les Ariens le traitoient d'heretique, et le chassoient de leur Eglise, soit pour avoir un pretexte de demander des Conciles, soit que sa hardiesse

²¹ pp. 410–11.

à décider les choses de la foy, et ses raisonnemens embarrassez et sophistiques les fissent croire en effet qu'il avoit d'autres sentimens que les leurs. Ce qu'il eut de plus remarquable fut cette impudence superbe, que luy faisoit dire que Dieu luy avoit revelé tout ce qu'il avoit caché aux autres depuis les Apostres jusques à son temps. Il portoit mesme sa temerité jusqu'à oser pretendre qu'il connoissoit tres clairement la majesté divine, et mieux qu'il ne se connoissoit luy mesme; en quoy il fut imité par ses disciples qui n'avoient pas moins d'orgueil que luy.²²

[As for his heresies, he had in fact no others than those of the Arians, having merely penetrated them more deeply and better understood their consequences, and having stated more fully what was concealed within their impious doctrines. Nevertheless, by an act of simple justice, the Arians treated him as a heretic and expelled him from their church; perhaps in order to have a pretext for demanding new councils, perhaps because his daring in deciding matters of faith and his challenging arguments and sophistries drove them to believe that he held positions other than theirs. What is more remarkable still was the crowning impudence with which he declared that God had revealed to him all that had been kept hidden from the days of the Apostles to his own. He carried this arrogance so far as to dare claim that he clearly understood the divine majesty, more clearly even than it understood itself; and in this he was imitated by disciples no less conceited than he was.]

One would like to know what Aetius really said: perhaps that the divine majesty had no need of an apparatus of self-understanding, and that by a critique of all doctrines he had himself reached the height of human understanding of what could not be comprehended. He may, or may not, have gone on to claim an insight into the central mystery for himself; from scepticism to enthusiasm could be a single step. In the historical literature, which is all we have, Aetius is made to stand for an 'anomoian' faction which causes the history of Constantius's last councils to be written as a competition between three parties. There are the orthodox, consubstantialist as always, and increasingly seen as western and Latin once one looks beyond Athanasius and his supporters in Egypt. In a central position there persist the former 'Eusebians', homoiousian in their attempt to substitute the Son's similarity for his identity in substance with the Father, but increasingly termed 'semi-Arian' on account of their willingness to see the Son as created from eternity in all but identity with him. Apart from both, but in contact with each separately, stands the menacing faction of the anomoians, who propose in general that the attempt at compromise be given up, since the concept of substance is unscriptural, as the Arians have claimed since Nicaea, and also philosophically untenable, if one is willing to adopt the radical logic of Aetius.

To propose – as the term 'anomoian' may suggest – that there is no intellectual means of resolving the debate, and that the concept of

²² p. 407.

substance itself is a failure, is not incompatible with the Christian position that the nature of God is a mystery incomprehensible by the human mind. But Incarnation and Trinity have made it inescapable that statements about the central mystery be made and measured against one another; and debate has reached a stage where no offer of a common formula can be made without the suspicion that it conceals continued adherence to any one of the three main positions. Consubstantialists and semi-Arians suspect one another, and both may suspect radical anomoianism of concealing radical disbelief. What is remarkable about Tillemont's historical narrative is that he clearly perceives the complexity of this three-sided debate, precisely because of his single-track vision of the course it must take. For him, the divinity of the Son, and his sharing the substance of the Father, are non-negotiable; any compromise, and any offer to negotiate, must end, where Arius began and Aetius has arrived, at the reduction of the Son to a creature and the denial of his divinity. Along this road with no stopping point he can identify several stages of descent, and there is a political narrative of their intentions. His capacity to write a history is a consequence of what Gibbon terms his bigotry.

(III)

Tillemont has for some time been re-narrating the accounts given by Athanasius and others of endeavours to expropriate orthodox bishops in both east and west (though especially the latter, as given in his sources) and build these up into a general persecution of the church like those he has related earlier;²³ like them willed by God as occasion for the church to discharge its role as witness as well as vehicle – though this time there are fewer opportunities for martyrdom and confession in the full sense of these words (which he does not hesitate to use). The real crisis, however, occurs in the councils of the church, where there is danger of apostasy: the summoning in what proves the last year of Constantius's life of a council at Nicomedia, later divided into an eastern council at Seleucia and a western at Rimini. This is originally called for by Arians, either semi-Arians troubled by Aetius's extremism or political tacticians seeking to extend his influence; the master politicians Ursacius and Valens, always extreme Arians and now anomoians at heart, pursue a complex strategy of apparently denouncing Aetius while offering homoiousian and even orthodox bishops a series of formulae so open that they are without dogma (and therefore anomoian). Nothing now stands against the recognition of the

²³ *Mémoires*, VI, pp. 366–77 (chapters LII–LV), drawn entirely from Athanasius, Hilary of Poitiers and Lucifer of Cagliari.

Son as pure creature. The pair descend upon the western bishops at Rimini and succeed, by diverse strategies both dialectical and procedural, in manoeuvring them into subscribing to a confession so open and unspecific as neither to declare nor to exclude any position at all. It was here, according to St Jerome writing in the next century, that the world was astonished to find itself Arian; the westerners returning to their sees²⁴ realised, not only that they had failed to confess their faith that only the Trinity declares the Unity of God, but that they had given way to a powerful faction with the emperor behind it, intent on going beyond toleration to an imposed rejection of doctrine. In Tillemont's narrative the year 361 is a dark moment in the history of the church, but the resources of Providence are as ever infinite. Not only does Tillemont choose this moment for a detailed account of the eighteen sectarian positions into which the Arian persuasion now disintegrates;²⁵ but a totally unexpected deliverance is at hand.

La nacelle des Apostres agitée par ces vents furieux, et battu de toutes parts par des flots si violens, estoit en danger de faire naufrage, et il ne restoit plus d'esperance. Mais dans ce moment le Seigneur s'éveille, il commanda à la tempesta, la beste meurt,²⁶ et la tranquillité revient. Car Julien, qui succeda à Constance, voulant se venger des officiers de Constance, qui luy avoient rendu des mauvais offices, fut en effet le ministre de Dieu pour punir l'eunuque Eusebe grand Chambellan, et les autres principaux appuis de l'Arianisme.

Mais ce qui fut encore plus avantageux à l'Eglise, c'est qu'il rappella d'exil tous ceux que Constance avait bannis aux sujet de la religion. Il est aisé de s'imaginer que son intention en cela n'estoit nullement de rendre la paix à l'Eglise. Il ne songeoit qu'à s'acquérir la bienveillance des peuples, à rendre la gouvernement de Constance odieux, ou mesme à détruire les Chrétiens par leurs propres divisions, qu'il croyoit devoir s'augmenter d'autant plus, qu'ils auroient tous la liberté de defendre leurs sentimens, comme on le voit par les auteurs payens, aussibien que par les Chrétiens. Mais Dieu dont la sagesse sçait tirer le bien du mal mesme, ne laissa pas de se servir de la fausse politique pour la ruine de l'Arianisme. Car quoique quelques uns des plus méchans d'entre les Ariens, fussent compris dans ce rappel, comme Aece et Eunome, aussibien que l'heresiarque Photin, neanmoins l'Eglise en retira le principal fruit.²⁷

[The little ship of the Apostles, tossed about by these furious winds and beaten on every quarter by such stormy waves, was in danger of shipwreck and there remained no hope. But at this moment the Lord roused himself; he commanded the tempest, the Beast perished, and calm was restored. For Julian, who succeeded

²⁴ Gibbon's account may be found at Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 788–9.

²⁵ *Mémoires*, VI, pp. 521–2.

²⁶ It is not clear which of the biblical beasts is intended here. Language borrowed from St Jerome may be at work.

²⁷ pp. 525–6.

Constantius, desiring vengeance on the latter's ministers, who had done him much injury, was in effect God's instrument for punishing the eunuch Eusebius, the grand chamberlain, and the other chief upholders of Arianism.

But what was yet more to the Church's advantage, he recalled from exile all those whom Constantius had banished on account of religion. It is easy to see that his intention was by no means to bring about the peace of the Church. He aimed only to win the good will of the people, to make the memory of Constantius's government odious, or indeed to destroy the Christians by their own internal divisions, which he thought would surely increase when all were at liberty to defend their own beliefs. This we can learn from pagan authors no less than from Christian. But God, whose wisdom can draw good from evil itself, did not fail to employ his false policies to bring about the ruin of Arianism. For though some of the worst of the Arians were included in this reprieve, like Aetius, Eunomius and the heresiarch Photinus, nevertheless the Church received the greater benefit.]

Nearly 400 pages before, Tillemont had told the same story in somewhat different terms.

La mort de Constance arrivé le troisieme de novembre 361, rendit la paix à l'Eglise Catholique dans toutes les provinces de l'Empire. Car la persecution de Julien qui la combattoit au dehors, estoit peu de chose au prix de la guerre qu'elle avoit ressentie dans ses propre entrailles sous Constance. L'Afrique seule fut privée de cette joie commune, et la guerre du dehors y ralluma plus que jamais celle du dedans. Julien qui avoit succédé à Constance son cousin, ayant abandonné la foy Chrétienne, n'avoit point de plus forte passion que de l'éteindre dans les autres. Mais il n'avoit ni assez de pouvoir, ni assez d'imprudence pour entreprendre de la faire par force. Il falut donc avoir recouru à la ruse; et il l'employa en plusieurs manieres que nous tascherons de représenter en un autre endroit. L'une de celles qu'il crut devoir luy réussir advantage, fut de fomentier les divisions que les diverses heresies avoient formées parmi les Chrétiens, en laissant à chaque secte une liberté toute entiere: et ce fut dans ce dessein qu'il rappela tous ceux qui avoient esté bannis sous Constance pour les differens de la religion. L'Eglise neanmoins tira un grand avantage de cet artifice que l'on employoit contre elle, par le rétablissement de ceux qui avoient defendu la foy Catholique. Il n'y eut que l'Afrique qui verifia ce que dit un payen;²⁸ ce qui faisoit l'esperance de Julien: Qu'il n'y a point de beste si cruelle aux hommes, que la plupart des Chrétiens le sont les uns aux autres.²⁹

[The death of Constantius on 3 November 361 restored peace to the Catholic Church in all provinces of the empire. For the persecution which Julian launched against it from without was a small matter compared with the war it had suffered in its inmost vitals under Constantius. Africa alone was deprived of this general happiness, and here war outside kindled more than ever the war within. Julian, succeeding his cousin Constantius, had abandoned his Christian faith and knew no greater passion than that for extinguishing it in others. But he had neither the power nor the recklessness necessary to attempt this by force. He must therefore

²⁸ i.e. Ammianus. ²⁹ *Mémoires*, vi, pp. 130–1.

have recourse to policy, and this he developed in several ways which we will attempt to present in another place. That from which he hoped the most was to foment the divisions which the several heresies had made among the Christians, by allowing complete freedom to every sect; and it was with this objective that he recalled all those who had been banished by Constantius for religious reasons. The Church, however, was greatly strengthened by this policy aimed against it, through the restoration of those who had defended the Catholic faith. Only Africa was left to verify that which a pagan had written and on which Julian pinned his hopes: that there is no beast as cruel to men as most Christians are to one another.]

To any historian principally concerned – and this does not exclude Gibbon – with the continuity of catholic doctrine, Constantius, not Julian, is the crucial figure, and the latter's neo-paganism is of itself an eccentric if spectacular interlude. Constantius, we are invited to believe, never fully understood what was being done in his name; a feather for each wind that blew, he clutched at a series of theological positions that were offered him and persecuted those they successively anathematised. Meanwhile, a succession of hard-headed theological politicians, from the two Eusebii to Ursacius and Valens, aligned the imperial sovereignty with a series of positions increasingly Arian and anomoian, until Constantius found himself supporting a series of screens behind which the Son was no more than a creature. The problem for a modern historian is that ancients and early moderns are at one in explaining this in terms of theological commitment; though Tillemont does say once that Arians knew no God but Caesar,³⁰ it is not explicitly suggested – and it is hard to find it implied – that the secular power preferred a diminished to an exalted view of Christ's nature, since that diminished the spiritual independence of the church. Catholics and deists – we have met none of the latter yet – join in deploring the secular power's committing itself to a theological position, since that must make it either too strong or too weak, perhaps both at once; we are taken no further.

Julian meanwhile interrupts the story, but does not continue it. His achievement, as the instrument of providence Tillemont takes him to be, is to dismantle the formidable structure of Eusebian and anomoian power which has built itself up under Constantius. Since his reign ends in disaster and will be followed by further disasters, the history that began at or after the Council of Nicaea cannot be resumed until the reign of Theodosius I, who will close the pagan temples and impose the Nicene creed.

³⁰ p. 379.

(I)

Tillemont wrote a history of the Arian controversy, narrating human actions in a sacred context, but in all their complex human ambiguity. He was to this extent a historian, not merely the devoted antiquarian, fanatical in both his orthodoxy and his scrupulous accuracy, portrayed by Gibbon, who mocked, admired and depended upon him. The paradox is that it was the rigour of his orthodoxy that impelled him to write a history of ambiguity. For him the dogma of consubstantiality was the only way of stating the divinity of Christ and the ultimate mystery of the Incarnation. To mitigate the one was to mitigate the other, and the first step in mitigation was the first on a slippery slope that led irresistibly to the reduction of the Son to nothing more than a creature and the implicit denial of Christ's divinity. He thought that Arius himself, and even more openly his immediate followers, had descended all the way to this denial, and that the powerful party of 'Eusebians', from Eusebius of Nicomedia to Ursacius and Valens in 360, were concealing it beneath pretensions to reconcile their position with the Nicene doctrine of substance. Constantine, and even more Constantius, had been misled into believing them, but Ursacius and Valens had deliberately abandoned the Nicene position while deceiving the Latin bishops by concealing their action behind a terminological smoke-screen, and the heretic Aetius had blown their cover so thoroughly that they had been obliged to condemn him while secretly agreeing with him. Tillemont's history was the product of a single-track mind; but it was a history, whose premises were announced so unambiguously that they permitted the narration of actions which had sought to conceal them in ambiguity.

Gibbon wrote from premises very close to Tillemont's, but capable of leading to religious conclusions almost the opposite of his, yet permitting a historical narrative the same as Le Clerc's. The nature of God – to which must be added the mystery of incarnation – could not be comprehended by the human mind or expressed in human speech; the attempt to do the

latter must give rise to a chain of ambiguities leading into one another.¹ For both Le Clerc and Gibbon, this was the key to what had happened at Nicaea and in the thirty-five years following; for Tillemont, it gave access to what must happen outside orthodoxy. It left three courses open to the enquiring mind: faith in the mystery revealed, which is obviously Tillemont's position; the decision to withhold faith and regard mystery with a scepticism close to outright rejection, which we take to have been Gibbon's; and the attempt to restate mystery in some form less difficult for the intellect to accept. In spite of his constant warnings against the ambiguity and inconstancy of language, Le Clerc had followed the last course in proposing to translate *Logos* not by *verbum* or even *sermo*, but by *ratio*;² a step which had involved him in Sabellianism, as Gibbon – who may or may not have known that Le Clerc had taken it – had warned that it must, in reducing the *Logos* from a 'who' to a 'which'³ and implicitly challenging Christ's divinity.

In saying this, Gibbon was saying no less than an orthodox Trinitarian like Tillemont would and did say; but he was doing so in the course of a demonstration that there were only three interpretations of the Trinity that the rational mind unaided by faith and revelation could adopt, and that none of them was orthodox.⁴ Here we are fully entitled to see Gibbon's own scepticism displayed; what the 'rational mind' cannot accept he is certainly not going to profess as his faith – it clearly is not – but it does not follow that he is writing chapter 21, any more than chapters 15 and 16 or the *Decline and Fall* as a whole, as a sustained statement of the unbelieving position and the case for adopting it. He is isolating a series of intellectual positions as a prelude to what happened when actors in history were obliged to choose between them; not writing history as an argument for adopting one of them. It is the case, however, that the sceptical position – which is his – is that best suited for presenting all three of them, and the statement of the Christian mystery itself, as phenomena arrived at by human minds in the course of history. It is possible to read the relevant passages in the opening of chapter 21 as a historical account of how late Platonism and the Christian mythos came together to create the opening words of the Gospel according to St John, and transform the Platonic concept of the Trinity by adding the mystery of incarnation. Gibbon is writing a history of how the Incarnation came to be pronounced, of the historical circumstances in which it was proclaimed, and of certain consequences of its being proclaimed under them. His

¹ *RFT*, pp. 102 *et seq.* ² *RFT*, pp. 115–16. ³ Above, p. 91. ⁴ Above, pp. 90–92.

doubt about it is clear and could be shocking, but supplies neither the matter of his history nor the purpose with which this was written.

So far then, chapter 21 offers a history of how toleration, incarnation, heresy and theological dispute arose in the Christian mind as problems plaguing the newly Christian empire. This is the theme of the chapter to the Council of Nicaea and beyond; but while never vanishing from sight, it does not supply a controlling theme to the chapter as a whole, and it must be asked whether there is one. Gibbon follows Tillemont in making the Nicene proclamation of consubstantiality the benchmark of orthodoxy which renders post-Nicene history a history of heresies, but does not follow him in narrating this as a single epic narrative of the persecution and triumph of orthodoxy. Neither, however, does he follow the course we might be led to expect from the standard portrayal of Gibbon as moved by a detestation of Christianity, and employing irony and critical derision to make his history a destruction of it. It would have been possible for him to do so, and it is hard for some modern readers not to take for granted that he did. The tools for doing so existed in his time. There were Arian and unitarian theologians capable of writing Nicene history as an anti-Athanasian polemic, and this could have developed into a deist or Humean demonstration that Trinitarian, Arian and unitarian theologies were alike in being intellectually absurd. Gibbon had been accused of taking this position – though the polemic of 1776–81 does not seem to have been renewed in response to chapter 21 – and his language makes it plain that he knew it to be possible. Very likely he sympathised with it, but he did not write chapter 21 to advance it. The history he writes was performed by actors who did not think it absurd, and the sources he uses present it as a narrative of orthodoxy assailed and triumphant. Irony can easily be detected in his writing but he does not organise it into an instrument of destruction.

He does not follow Tillemont in supplying a unified ecclesiastical history of the reign of Constantius, but breaks it down into a succession of mini-essays, the last of which is to say the least unexpected, whose coherence with one another may be questioned. We have already seen⁵ that in the first of these he presents the orthodox position as unswerving and unshakable, and the 'Arian' as dissolving rapidly into fragmentation; a narrative that telescopes into a single sentence thirty-five years of history.⁶ Having declined to 'swell this theological digression'⁷ – from what? – he proceeds to summarise it by setting out the three main positions from which the dogma of consubstantiality might be opposed.

⁵ Above, p. 103. ⁶ The Council of Nicaea met in 325; that of Rimini in 360.

⁷ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 785.

The first of these, in the order in which Gibbon presents them, is the radically anomoian⁸ or Aetian: the Son as a creature cannot be in any way like the Father as his creator; a philosophically correct statement, Gibbon observes, given the assumption (which he does not mention) that he is indeed a creature. Aetius's dialectical skills make it impossible to sustain any proposition about the Son, and therefore (one presumes) any statement of his divinity. The two that remain assert the Son's likeness to the Father, but on different grounds; the Father has indeed created him, but in one case simply as a being like him in most or all respects, in the other as a being of a substance like to or identical with that of his creator. The last is the homoiousian position proper, so close to the homoousian as almost to bridge the gap between the Son created and the Son begotten (the exact meaning of the last word is not discussed). Well-meaning seekers after agreement explore this possibility, usually in vain; but Gibbon's choice of the western bishop Hilary of Poitiers to represent this tendency leads to what may have been his goal in reviewing all three positions. We arrive at a rather startling conclusion.

The provinces of Egypt and Asia, which cultivated the language and manners of the Greeks, had deeply imbibed the venom of the Arian controversy. The familiar study of the Platonic system, a vain and argumentative disposition, a copious and flexible idiom, supplied the clergy and people of the East with an inexhaustible flow of words and distinctions; and, in the midst of their fierce contentions, they easily forgot the doubt which is recommended by philosophy and the submission which is enjoined by religion. The inhabitants of the West were of a less inquisitive spirit; their passions were not so forcibly moved by invisible objects, their minds were less frequently exercised by the habit of dispute . . .⁹ The Latins had received the rays of divine knowledge through the dark and doubtful medium of a translation. The poverty and stubbornness of their native tongue was not always capable of affording just equivalents for the Greek terms, for the technical words of the Platonic philosophy, which had been consecrated, by the Gospel or by the church, to express the mysteries of the Christian faith, and a verbal defect might introduce into the Latin theology a long train of error or perplexity. But as the western provincials had the good fortune of deriving their religion from an orthodox source, they preserved with steadiness the doctrine which they had accepted with docility; and when the Arian pestilence approached their frontiers, they were supplied with the seasonable preservative of the Homoousian by the paternal care of the Roman pontiff.¹⁰

⁸ Spelt 'anoméen' by Tillemont, 'anomocean' by Barnes 1993.

⁹ Gibbon here inserts the statement that the orthodox Hilary of Poitiers was 'a stranger to the Nicene creed' thirty years after its formulation. See ch. 21, n. 72, for Hilary's Latin and whether it fully justifies this claim.

¹⁰ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 787–8.

Gibbon's account of 'Arian' or anti-consubstantialist theology is concluding with the escape of the western intellect from it, carried out by some unexpected agencies. If, as we very well may, we think of Enlightenment as the mind's liberation from metaphysics, it is achieved here through the *rusticitas* of the Latin language, as opposed to the Greek 'inexhaustible flow of words and distinctions'. Scholastic Latin is a millennium away, and the fourth-century westerners are relatively free from the intellect's capacity to create meanings which mean nothing. Is Gibbon's thought here Leclercian? Is he saying, as he has said before, that the Christian revelation is a mystery beyond comprehension, and that language defeats itself by multiplying hopeless attempts to comprehend it; or is he indicating that the Johannine revelation is itself a Platonic construct, and that the message of the original Gospels was something plain and simple? The former made better sense of history, but the latter had more appeal to the philosopher, and sometimes to the magistrate, spiritual or civil. Gibbon is furthermore indicating that the orthodoxy of the Latins, which is also their freedom from speech acts multiplied *praeter necessitatem*, is maintained by authority, and by the authority of none other than the bishop of Rome. It is the first appearance of an unexpected relationship between papacy and liberty, which will be indicated later in chapter 21 and importantly developed in future volumes of the *Decline and Fall*.

This section of chapter 21 concludes with the now familiar story of how 'the honest simplicity of the Latin bishops' was conned, by Ursacius and Valens at Rimini, into subscribing a declaration which left the world

surprised to find itself Arian. But the bishops of the Latin provinces had no sooner reached their respective dioceses than they discovered their mistake, and repented of their weakness. The ignominious capitulation was rejected with disdain and abhorrence, and the Homoeousian standard, which had been shaken but not overthrown, was more firmly replanted in all the churches of the West.¹¹

Without mentioning Julian or divine providence – or so far the history of the eastern churches – Gibbon has retold in his own terms the history which for Tillemont was nothing less than a struggle to maintain the divinity of Christ. This passage, however, concludes Gibbon's attempt to provide the ecclesiastical events of Constantius's reign with their context in the history of theology. He now, and only now, proceeds to narrate them as events in the history of empire. Here begins the second of the mini-essays into which he divides the narrative of Constantinian ecclesiastical history.

¹¹ p. 789.

Such was the rise and progress, and such were the natural revolutions, of those theological disputes which disturbed the peace of Christianity under the reigns of Constantine and of his sons. But as those princes presumed to extend their despotism over the faith, as well as over the lives and fortunes of their subjects, the weight of their suffrage sometimes inclined the ecclesiastical balance: and the prerogatives of the King of Heaven were settled, or changed, or modified, in the cabinet of an earthly monarch.¹²

What follows, however, is by no means a history of despots imposing their own solutions. The emperors are perplexed by problems they do not understand, and oscillate between the opposites of theology and faction. They are of course displaying the characteristics of despotism: irresponsible power joined to weakness and uncertainty in counsel. They are entangled in the ambiguities of language which are at the root of theology and its disputes, and in the dilemma of secular authority when faced with the problems of the sacred; once again, they are despots if they impose solutions, impotent if they do not. Modern history as Gibbon understands it has begun.

He now follows Tillemont in the narrative we have already studied: that of Constantine's reversals of policy before, during and after the Council of Nicaea; from indifference to involvement, from condemning Arius to recalling him from exile and demanding his readmission to communion. The unknown Arian counsellor reappears, and there is a footnote drawing attention to how his secret heresy made its way from eunuchs to the empress, the emperor and the public; Gibbon invites comparison with Voltaire's account in *Candide* of the progress of syphilitic infection.¹³ He offers no better explanation of Constantine's adoption of a 'Eusebian' policy. Certainly, the historians Gibbon follows, from Socrates and Sozomen to Tillemont and Le Clerc, say only of the emperors that they did not understand the issues and were prisoners of intrigue among their counsellors; but by separating the narrative of imperial action from that of theology changing according to its own logic, Gibbon has deprived himself of any capacity to relate either as taking place in a context supplied by the other. There can be no suggestion that Constantine or Constantius, Eusebius of Nicomedia or Ursacius and Valens in partnership, were pursuing a *politique* strategy of bringing about a theological compromise for the secular purpose of preventing the church from disturbing the peace of the empire. When Gibbon laments the lack of any Paolo Sarpi of the fourth century, he may well be lamenting the lack of any such history; but

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ p. 792, n. 86. *Candide*, ch. iv, any edition. Jortin, here cited by Gibbon, gives (Jortin, 1805, III, pp. 1–2) an English paraphrase of Socrates's account of the doctrine's ascent from eunuchs to women, guardsmen, the empress, the emperor, and the public.

he is not in a position to supply one. His philosophical scepticism – ultimately Leclercian and Lockean – told him why a history of theology must be a history of irreconcilability; but it did not empower him to retell the story in philosophically secular terms.

The narrative proceeds through the reign of Constantius, passing over the years in which he shared empire with his brothers in order to arrive at the rebellion of Magnentius and the capture of the imperial mind by Valens of Mursa at the battle of that name.¹⁴ The emperor now becomes the instrument of an ecclesiastical party called ‘Arian’, but it is not clear what that party sought to achieve, and Constantius appears only as utterly confused among three possible theologies.

The eunuchs, the women, and the bishops, who governed the vain and feeble mind of the emperor, had inspired him with an insuperable dislike to the Homoousion, but his timid conscience was alarmed by the impiety of Aetius . . . The mind of Constantius, which could neither be moderated by reason nor fixed by faith, was blindly impelled to either side of the dark and empty abyss,¹⁵ by his horror of the opposite extreme; he alternately embraced and condemned the sentiments he successively banished and recalled the leaders, of the Arian and Semi-Arian factions.¹⁶

And later, in a rather different context, the adventures of Candide are implicitly recalled.

Such was the nice and capricious taste of the emperor Constantius, and so easily was he offended by the slightest deviation from his imaginary standard of Christian truth, that he persecuted, with equal zeal, those who defended the *consubstantiality*, those who asserted the *similar substance*, and those who denied the *likeness*, of the Son of God. Three bishops, degraded and banished for those adverse opinions, might possibly meet in the same place of exile,¹⁷

like the six kings encountered by Candide.¹⁸ Gibbon, however, is not engaging direct in Voltairean ridicule; he knows the three positions are dead ends, but he also knows there is a long and complex history of why the Christian intellect was forced to choose between them, and that to escape the choice it would have been necessary to renounce both Plato and the Gospel of St John, as not even Aetius was ready to do. This was not a historical possibility in the fourth century, and though in the eighteenth there were those prepared to go to such lengths, Gibbon gives no indication in this chapter of knowing they were there, still less of sympathising with them. A year or so after publishing these passages, Gibbon

¹⁴ Above, pp. 55–56; Womersley, 1994, I, p. 793.

¹⁵ To be read with care: is the abyss of the universe empty of God, or the abyss of human language empty of his presence?

¹⁶ p. 794. ¹⁷ pp. 808–9. ¹⁸ *Candide*, ch. xxvi.

was denounced by one of them, Joseph Priestley, a unitarian and a Christian believer, who thought that by retaining the orthodox substructure Gibbon was denying Christ's divine mission as Priestley saw it.¹⁹ Gibbon's unbelief, however we define it, was not a simple matter.

Constantius sought to put an end to controversy by summoning the council which ultimately met at Seleucia and Rimini and by allowing Ursacius and Valens to impose, by means so oblique as to amount to both coercion and deceit,

a profession of faith which established the *likeness*, without expressing the *consubstantiality*, of the Son of God.

We have already seen, however, that this sleight of hand backfired; the Latin bishops saw through the text they had subscribed and returned to the standard of the *homoousion*. It is at this moment of apparent 'Arian' triumph and implicit Latin secession that Tillemont breaks off his narrative with the advent of Julian as instrument of the hidden hand of God. Gibbon adopts quite another strategy.

But the triumph of Arianism had been preceded by the removal of the orthodox clergy, whom it was impossible either to intimidate or to corrupt, and the reign of Constantius was disgraced by the unjust and ineffectual persecution of the great Athanasius.²⁰

Gibbon turns from the history of theology to the history of persecution, and to the tale of the adventures of a hero; a most unexpected one.

(II)

We have seldom an opportunity of observing, either in active or in speculative life, what effects may be produced, or what obstacles may be summoned, by the force of a single mind, when it is inflexibly applied to the pursuit of a single object. The immortal name of Athanasius will never be separated from the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity, to whose defence he consecrated every moment and every faculty of his being.

As bishop of Alexandria for forty-six years – interrupted by five exiles and twenty years of refuge or hiding –

his long administration was spent in a perpetual combat against the power of Arianism . . . almost every province of the Roman empire was successively witness to his merit, and his sufferings in the cause of the Homoousion, which he considered as the sole pleasure and business, as the duty, and the glory, of his life. Amid

¹⁹ Priestley, 1782; Turnbull, 1991; Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 235–49.

²⁰ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 795–6.

the storms of persecution the archbishop of Alexandria was patient of labour, jealous of fame, careless of safety; and although his mind was tainted by the contagion of fanaticism, Athanasius displayed a superiority of character and abilities, which would have qualified him, far better than the degenerate sons of Constantine, for the government of a great monarchy.²¹

From this total commitment to Trinitarian dogma, which must arouse thoughts of fanaticism and enthusiasm, Gibbon moves without a break to praise Athanasius's secular virtues:

continuously engaged with the prejudices and passions of every order of men from the monk to the emperor, the knowledge of human nature was his first and most important science. He preserved a distinct and unbroken view of a scene which was constantly shifting; and never failed to improve those decisive moments which are irrevocably past before they are perceived by a common eye. The archbishop of Alexandria was capable of distinguishing how far he might boldly command, and where he must dextrously insinuate; how long he might contend with power, and when he must withdraw from persecution; and while he directed the thunders of the church against heresy and rebellion, he could assume, in the bosom of his own party, the flexible and indulgent temper of a prudent leader.²²

The Trinitarian dogmatist has become an Enlightened prince, studying human nature from experience in order to make himself a master politician. Nevertheless rhetoric has nearly displaced narrative; the portrayal of Athanasius as hero is almost independent of the history of his actions in the politics of the church under Constantius. He spends the climactic years of that reign moving underground between Alexandria and the desert, and plays no direct part in the politics of Seleucia and Rimini. If his history is that of the survival and ultimate triumph of the Homoousion, he helps achieve it by making himself, his sufferings and victories, its symbol. Gibbon is displaying the history of a charisma, not of a tactical leadership, and rhetoric is more important here than the narrative it presents. It is a long way from Athanasius in Egypt to Liberius and Osius driven into a corner by Valens and Ursacius.

The sources from which historians worked become relevant here. Both Tillemont and Gibbon had access to a massive collection of Athanasius's own writings, which they treated as a major source for the history of the times. Tillemont wrote a lengthy biography of Athanasius,²³ published in a separate volume of his great work from that which contains his *histoire abrogée* of Arianism; and since Gibbon relied on Tillemont and did not himself possess Athanasius's works, T. D. Barnes, his modern critic, has suggested that he was merely following his predecessor.²⁴ It is in fact the case that Gibbon's footnotes regularly cite the Benedictine edition of

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 796. ²² p. 797. ²³ *Mémoires*, VIII, pp. 1–258. ²⁴ Barnes, 1993, pp. 1–2.

Athanasius published by Montfaucon. The relation between his account of Athanasius and Tillemont's is, however, very close, and Barnes further notes that he possessed a volume, published in 1738, edited by the Italian antiquarian Scipione Maffei, which included a text known as the *Historia Acephala*, that Gibbon might have used to correct Athanasius's account of his acts.²⁵ Professor Barnes is a sharp critic of the preference for rhetoric over veracity often displayed by ancient and early modern historians²⁶ and Gibbon's non-use of the *Historia Acephala* is indeed worth noting. He uses Maffei's volume mainly in connection with medieval history,²⁷ and it is conceivable that he read it only after writing chapter 21. What is important to the historian of historiography, however, is that Gibbon still felt able to deploy rhetorical portraits either because he admired them as literature, or because they enabled him to make historical statements he thought important.

This seems to have been particularly the case with his treatment of Athanasius. Seven years after publishing it, he had occasion in a later volume to portray Pope Gregory VII as a world-altering figure, himself driven into exile from his see of Rome, and after an account of him by no means free from ambivalence, he remarked in a footnote:

That pope was undoubtedly a great man, a second Athanasius, in a more fortunate age of the church. May I presume to add, that the portrait of Athanasius is one of the passages of my history (vol. I, p. 796, etc.) with which I am the least dissatisfied?²⁸

This portrait was of enduring importance to Gibbon, for reasons having to do with the history of the papacy. We have to consider what these were. In the first place, we need to note the circumstance that Gibbon has chosen the most inflexible of Trinitarians as the hero of his history of the Arian controversy. He might have been expected to choose otherwise. In introducing his history of Athanasius, Professor Barnes prefixes a quotation from William Whiston,²⁹ reminding us that the archbishop was 'a violent party man' and that his writings are not history but contributions to a party polemic. This incontrovertibly true statement seems to be all that Barnes desires to convey; he does not mention that Whiston – 'the fanatic Whiston' as Gibbon once called him³⁰ – was himself a violent party

²⁵ *Ibid.* It is possible that n. 132 to chapter 23 (Womersley, 1994, I, p. 905 n.) alludes to the events of the *Historia Acephala*. See further p. 961, n. 6.

²⁶ Barnes, 1981 (Eusebius), 1993 (Athanasius), 1998 (Ammianus Marcellinus).

²⁷ Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1237.

²⁸ *DF*, v, ch. 56, n. 83; Womersley, 1994, III, p. 504. Gibbon's pagination updated.

²⁹ Barnes, 1993, [v; unpaginated]. The passage quoted is from Whiston's *Historical Preface to Primitive Christianity Reviv'd*. Force, 1985.

³⁰ *DF*, v, ch. 54, n. 34; Womersley, 1994, III, pp. 437, 1274.

man, an Arian and anti-Trinitarian (together with Isaac Newton) in a controversy that had gone on through the eighteenth century and was loudly active in Gibbon's own time. Nor – it must instantly be added – did Gibbon find this worth mentioning in chapter 21; we must search his footnotes and his letters and papers, for his exiguous references to a controversy in which apparently he had no desire to take part.³¹ (His critics, it has appeared in the previous volume, were both orthodox and unorthodox in the matter of the Trinity.) Nevertheless, he insists on Athanasius's adherence to the Homoousion and does not seem to deride it, though we might have expected him to do otherwise. If he had been the 'deist' it has been so easy to call him, the normal progress from Christianity towards that position began with diminution of the divinity of Christ and continued until nothing was left of Jesus but a teacher of natural morality and nothing of God but the creator of the universe and its natural law. Gibbon did not have to follow that path, but we might expect him to have shown some sympathy for the Arians ancient and modern embarked upon it. He does not do so.

His portrait of Athanasius is partly rhetoric and partly narrative, but there are points at which he uses it to offer insights into the history he is relating. Before arriving at the passages already quoted, he had remarked that

the most sagacious of the Christian theologians, the great Athanasius himself, has candidly confessed, that whenever he forced his understanding to mediate on the divinity of the *Logos*, his toilsome and unavailing efforts recoiled on themselves; that the more he thought, the less he comprehended; and the more he wrote, the less capable was he of expressing his thoughts. In every step of the enquiry, we are compelled to feel and acknowledge the immeasurable disproportions between the size of the object and the capacity of the human mind. We may strive to abstract the notions of time, of space, and of matter, which so closely adhere to all the perceptions of our experimental knowledge. But as soon as we presume to reason of infinite substance, of spiritual generation; as often as we deduce any positive conclusion from a negative idea, we are involved in darkness, perplexity, and inevitable contradiction.³²

The latter sentences of this passage are of course Gibbon's philosophical commentary and leave it clear why Gibbon is not the Trinitarian that Athanasius was. It is easy to proceed from them to the modern conclusion that what the mind cannot express is therefore nonsensical, and that

³¹ See *Letters*, I, p. 505, for Gibbon's derisive account, 8 February 1772, of the victory of 'our dear mama the Church of England' over a parliamentary petition for relief from subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles. This was aimed against the more Trinitarian and 'Athanasian' articles.

³² Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 775–6.

beliefs in God and the absolute are phenomena of the mind deluding itself. It is very possible that this was Gibbon's own position, but it is a question whether he was writing with the intention of indicating it and persuading others to adopt it. He was, we may suggest, a historian first and a philosopher second, interested at this point in examining what happened in history when human minds arrived at this predicament and their arrival had consequences for the conduct of empire. Philosophically, we are now once more in the company of Le Clerc, who cannot have been far from Gibbon's mind when writing these sentences. The existence and attributes of God are inexpressible and the intellect's efforts to express them must be in vain; but Gibbon does not go on, as Le Clerc had gone, to dismiss Nicene theology as meaningless birdsong.³³ Athanasius knows what his predicament is, and persists in proclaiming his commitment to the Trinity as a response to it; his party at Nicaea proclaims the Homoousion. Gibbon knows that the Christian intellect faced with God, the Logos, the Trinity and the Incarnation, must either reject them or take the leap into proclaiming them. We have arrived at the fideist-sceptic dilemma, and Gibbon is concerned with what happened next; there is not much irony, and less mockery, as he relates his narrative.

It is worth noting that the passage just quoted is based on an epistle written by Athanasius himself – an epistle to monks, as Gibbon does not fail to relate³⁴ – and that it is also paraphrased by Tillemont, in language worth comparing with Gibbon's. Athanasius is writing late in the reign of Constantius, and has been driven into concealing himself among desert monks, to whom he addresses what both Tillemont and Gibbon call his 'epistle to the solitaires'.³⁵

Dans la lettre qui sert de preface à tout l'ouvrage, il dit que la premiere partie luy avoit donné beaucoup de peine, parce que plus il s'efforçoit de contempler la divinité du Verbe, plus il connoissoit qu'elle est inconcevable; plus il penetrait dans ce mystere, plus il voyoit combien il est impenetrable et que toutes ses pensées les plus sublimes ne pouvant former dans son esprit qu'une ombre obscure de la verité, ses paroles mesmes ne pouvoient exprimer cette lumiere quelque foible qu'elle fust. Cette difficulté pensa luy faire [sic] abandonner son dessein; mais la crainte d'attrister ses amis, et de donner cet avantage à ses ennemis, l'obligea de continuer; et il crut que s'il estoit impossible de faire comprendre la verité, ill n'estoit pas difficile de confondre et de faire abhorrer le mensonge et l'heresie; ce qui suffisoit aux Fideles pour embrasser la verité. Il prie les solitaires de recevoir son écrit de cette maniere, et de luy pardonner s'il y

³³ *RFT*, pp. 101–2. ³⁴ Ch. 21, n. 32; Womersley, 1994, I, p. 775.

³⁵ *Mémoires*, VIII, pp. 188–9; Womersley, 1994, I, p. 809, n. 133 ('his prolix Epistle to the Solitaires').

manque quelque chose. Et je croy, dit-il, que tout y manquera. Il se recommande fort à leurs prières.³⁶

[In the letter which serves as a preface to the whole work, he says that the first part has cost him great pains, because the more he forced himself to contemplate the divinity of the Word, the more he found that it cannot be conceived; the deeper he penetrated into this mystery, the more he perceived that it is impenetrable, and that since all his most sublime thoughts could form in his mind only a dim shadow of the truth, his words could convey only the little light this could bring. This difficulty had made him think of abandoning his project; but the fear of disheartening his friends and giving the advantage to his adversaries obliged him to continue; and he believed that if it was impossible to comprehend the truth, it would not be difficult to confound and hold up to abhorrence falsehood and heresy, which would suffice to help the faithful to embrace the truth. He begs the solitaries to receive his letter accordingly and pardon him if it is lacking in any way. And I believe, he says, that everything in it will fall short. He commends himself to their prayers.]

Whatever may have been Athanasius's intention in the fourth century, it is in its concluding sentences that Tillemont's Athanasius at the end of the seventeenth takes the step that Gibbon himself did not take: the fideist option of affirming a mystery that cannot be expressed in speech. Gibbon will not do this; he thinks that reason cannot take this step and even that it is unreasonable to go beyond reason; but as a historian what matters to him is that great minds did take the step, and he makes Athanasius the hero of those who took it. The majority at Nicaea who affirmed the Homooousion did so with the deliberate intention of affirming a mystery, to diminish which was to deny it. Gibbon does not tell us, though he certainly knew, that he lived among those, whether a majority or a minority, who did intend to diminish and deny it; he is not writing the history of the fourth century in order to take part in the history of his own. If, as is quite likely, he thought Athanasius and Arius equally beyond reason, he was not writing history in order to say so.

Gibbon proceeds to relate the long career of Athanasius, from the last years of Constantine's reign to his climactic exile in the last years of Constantius; there is to be a further relation of his encounters with Julian and his successor Valens after him. In this narrative – heavily indebted to Athanasius himself³⁷ – his fortunes as contested archbishop of Alexandria become increasingly, though never completely, identified with those of the Homooousion as against its rivals, as already related in the course of chapter 21. That is, the enemies who drive him out of Alexandria in successive exiles are invariably Arians in one or other senses of that term, and this

³⁶ *Mémoires*, VIII, pp. 190–1. Should the words noted read 'luy fait penser'?

³⁷ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 796, n. 96, 804, n. 119, 809, n. 133, 818, n. 152.

forms part though not the whole of their motives in acting as his enemies. Increasingly, however, the attempts of 'Eusebian' and 'Arian' factions to propose (or impose) non-Nicene formulae at successive church councils become involved with demands that the mainly western bishops, and emperors, who have given succour to Athanasius in his successive exiles, withdraw their support of him; so that the cause of the Homoousion and that of Athanasius become part of an increasing conflict between the eastern and western halves of a divided empire as well as church. Exiled by Constantine, Athanasius travels to Trier; at the division of empire among the emperor's sons, he is protected by Constantine II, ruler in the west, who procures his restoration to Alexandria. At that emperor's death he is exiled again, and this time repairs to Rome, where he

passed three years as an exile and a suppliant on the holy threshold of the Vatican. By the assiduous study of the Latin language –

we have already heard how that tongue's lack of metaphorical sophistication encouraged adherence to the defiant simplicities of the Nicene creed –

he soon qualified himself to negotiate [*sic*] with the western clergy . . . the Roman Pontiff was persuaded to consider his appeal as the peculiar interest of the Apostolic see; and his innocence was unanimously declared in a council of fifty bishops of Italy.

It is taken up by Constans, now emperor of an undivided west, who calls a council of the whole church, soon divided into eastern and western synods, at which the Homoousian and Athanasian causes are for the first time debated and opposed together,

and Athanasius, who in the West was revered as a saint, was exposed as a criminal to the abhorrence of the East. The council of Sardica reveals the first symptoms of discord and division between the Greek and the Latin churches, which were separated by the accidental difference of faith, and the permanent distinction of language,³⁸

a *philosophe* comment, which is less than the point Gibbon chiefly desires to make. The emergence of Athanasius as a Latin hero is of less significance than his adoption by the popes of Rome. Gibbon here inserts a footnote:

I cannot forbear transcribing a judicious observation of Wetstein: Si tamen Historiam Ecclesiasticam velimus consulere, patebit jam inde a seculo quarto, cum, ortis controversiis, ecclesiae Graeciae doctores in duas partes scinderentur,

³⁸ pp. 801–2.

ingenio, eloquentia, numero tantum non aequales, eam partem quae vincere cupiebat Romae confugisse, majestatemque pontificis comiter coluisse, eoque parte oppressis per pontificem et episcopos Latinos adversariis praevaluisse, atque orthodoxiam in conciliis stabilivisse. Eam ob causam Athanasius, non sine comitatu, Romam petiit, pluresque annos ibi haesit.³⁹

[If, however, we wish to consult ecclesiastical history, it will appear that from the fourth century, when controversies arose and the doctors of the Greek church were divided into two parties, far from equal in learning, eloquence and number, that party which sought victory resorted to Rome and, closely allied with the papal authority, thereby overcame its adversaries, who were defeated by the Latin pope and clergy, and established orthodoxy in the Church's councils. It was for this reason that Athanasius, and not he alone, sought out Rome and spent many years there.]

Johann Jakob Wetstein – whom Gibbon elsewhere calls ‘the Arminian Wetstein’ and cites on a number of occasions⁴⁰ – was a German Protestant divine of liberal opinions, and by that definition no friend to the papal authority. The refugee easterners he describes as resorting to Rome were Trinitarians to a man, and Athanasius was their leader; it was through their alliance that orthodoxy and authority triumphed, first in the Latin church and later in European Christendom, and there were those among Wetstein’s contemporaries, and Gibbon’s, who deplored the triumph of both papacy and trinity. Whatever Wetstein thought of the matter, we who know of Gibbon’s later insistence on the alignment of Athanasius with Gregory VII must wonder what his position came to be, and the problem deepens as chapter 21 proceeds. The exiled archbishop is supported, not only by popes⁴¹ Julius and Liberius and the Latin bishops with few exceptions, but by the western emperor Constans, who employs military threats against his brother (Gibbon does not explore his motives) to procure for Athanasius a triumphant return to Alexandria.⁴² But Constans is then defeated and slain by Magnentius, and Magnentius by Constantius, who appears at Rome as sole ruler of church and empire. There ensues a narrative, already in part recounted and examined,⁴³ in which imperial power is used to force the heads of the Latin church to abandon first Athanasius and then – indirectly and obliquely – the Homoousion. These campaigns take place in the west, at Rome, Arles, Milan and Rimini, and are accompanied by persecution (Tillemont thinks it a persecution in succession to those before it) of the orthodox clergy in general.⁴⁴ Athanasius is distanced from it by his return to Egypt, and the

³⁹ *Ibid.*, n. 113. See this note for Gibbon’s reference to Wetstein’s writings.

⁴⁰ Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1274. ⁴¹ Gibbon prefers to call them ‘bishops of Rome’.

⁴² Womersley, 1994, I, p. 803. ⁴³ Above, p. 59. ⁴⁴ Above, p. 119.

history of doctrinal conflict in the east seems to be reduced to the history of his personal adventures under the persecution launched by Constantius against him in particular. He cannot be immediately attacked, since the emperor has consented to his return and he is strongly supported at Alexandria. Here Gibbon makes a striking remark, which may contain the key to much in the ensuing *Decline and Fall*.

If the emperor had capriciously decreed the death of the most eminent and virtuous citizen of the republic, the cruel order would have been executed without hesitation by the ministers of open violence or of specious injustice. The caution, the delay, the difficulty with which he proceeded in the condemnation and punishment of a popular bishop, discovered to the world that the privileges of the church had already revived a sense of order and freedom in the Roman government.⁴⁵

We return to the deep ambiguities of history ‘modern’ in Gibbon’s sense, marked by the co-existence of civil and sacred authority. The privileges of the church are the sole guarantee against the despotism of emperors, and Athanasius is a heroic figure in the ‘republic of bishops’ examined in the previous chapter.⁴⁶ But, as Wetstein reminds us, theological controversy has arisen, and with it the unique authority of the bishops of Rome, not yet spelt out by Gibbon as it has been by the Catholics Fleury and Tillemont, but inescapably part of the armature of freedom once it is. Orthodoxy, authority and even intolerance will be necessary forces in the emergence of western freedom, and there will be occasions in the later *Decline and Fall* when popes – first against Leo the Isaurian,⁴⁷ later against Frederick Barbarossa⁴⁸ – are shown defending the liberties of Italian republics as well as the Roman church. Gibbon is ultimately a Guelf, not a Ghibelline, historian, and when he remembered Athanasius as he wrote about Gregory VII, he acknowledged that it was in chapter 21 that the complexities of Latin and western history had begun to take shape.

Athanasius, however, does not return to Latin history once he is restored to Alexandria, and his adventures under Constantius’s persecution bring a new and surprising set of actors into the heroic narrative. The emperor, while procuring his condemnation by the western clergy, is unable to proceed against him in Egypt by the means offered by ecclesiastical politics, and resorts to military force, surreptitiously moving troops into Alexandria (we might be reading contemporary Arab history). There is a domestic climax – based entirely on Athanasius’s own narrative – recounting a nocturnal massacre of his congregation and his own escape

⁴⁵ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 805. ⁴⁶ Above, pp. 76–80.

⁴⁷ *DF*, v, ch. 49; Womersley, 1994, III, pp. 104–5.

⁴⁸ Womersley, 1994, III, 142–4; ‘the Guelfs displayed the banner of liberty and the church’.

into hiding.⁴⁹ Gibbon relates all this in heroic, not to say romantic terms, including a long account of his concealment in the house of a young woman supporter (Gibbon is prepared to believe this tale, and though amused by some of its incidents does not engage in Voltairean innuendo⁵⁰); but it is as he recounts the years Athanasius spent under persecution that his history takes an unexpected turn.

Athanasius in hiding is concealed by monks as well as by city supporters. He even spends time in the Thebaid desert, among settlements of monks living as solitaries, and his writings are both composed among them and addressed to them (though widely distributed). The narrative now comes to include a phenomenon regarding which both Protestants and *philosophes* expressed the utmost hatred and contempt: that of men and women alike deserting civil society to practise solitude, celibacy, mortification of the body, and mystical and visionary meditations. As solitaries they were Humean enthusiasts; as visionaries and miracle-workers superstitious. The growth of monasticism had long formed a part of ecclesiastical history; Eusebius of Caesarea in antiquity, Fleury and Tillemont in modernity, had included lives of Antony, Pachomius and other founders of 'divine philosophy' in their works. Gibbon had not; there had been allusions to monasticism as a source of darkness,⁵¹ and he had facetiously remarked that as Athanasius 'was writing to monks, there could not be occasion for him to *affect* a rational language'.⁵² In chapter 37 of the *Decline and Fall* he gives an account of the rise of monasticism in which a total repudiation of its values reaches the near-paranoid heights common in Enlightened literature.⁵³ In chapter 21, however, the case is different. Antony and the desert communities are the protectors of Athanasius, the paradoxical hero of orthodoxy and liberty, and the story of monasticism must be told accordingly.

[T]he deserts of Thebais were now peopled by a race of wild, yet submissive fanatics, who preferred the commands of their abbot to the laws of their sovereign. The numerous disciples of Antony and Pachomius received the fugitive primate as their father, admired the patience and humility with which he conformed to their strictest institutions . . . and persuaded themselves that their prayers, their fasts, and their vigils, were less meritorious than the zeal which they expressed, and the dangers which they braved, in the defence of truth and innocence. The monasteries of Egypt were seated in lonely and desolate places, on the summit of mountains, or in the islands of the Nile; and the sacred horn or trumpet of Tabenne was the well-known signal which assembled several thousand robust

⁴⁹ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 809–11. ⁵⁰ p. 813.

⁵¹ e.g. p. 756: 'the swarms of monks, who arose from the Nile, overspread and darkened the face of the Christian world'.

⁵² p. 775, n. 32. Gibbon's emphasis. ⁵³ Below, pp. 441–45.

and determined monks who, for the most part, had been peasants of the adjacent country. When their dark retreats were invaded by a military force which it was impossible to resist, they silently stretched out their necks to the executioner; and supported their national character, that tortures could never wrest from an Egyptian the confession of a secret he was resolved not to disclose.⁵⁴

Gibbon is close to Tillemont at this point, and it is interesting to note the different emphases with which both exalt the virtues of a resistance movement above those of mortification. Tillemont says of Athanasius that

Selon cette grace que Dieu luy avoit donnée de pacifier et de réunir tout le monde, il allia la vie solitaire à celle de la société religieuse. Et ajoutant encore cette philosophie toute spirituelle à la grace de son sacerdoce, il unit tellement en sa personne le repos de la solitude avec l'action et le travail de l'épiscopat, que tout le monde fut persuadé que la vie solitaire consistoit dans la tranquillité et l'uniformité des actions, plutôt que dans la séparation du corps et la retraite extérieure.⁵⁵

And when information was demanded of them

ces solitaires ne voulurent jamais leur dire un seul mot; mais se contenterent de rendre le cou pour recevoir la mort dont il les menaçoient; étant persuadés qu'en s'exposant pour Athanasius ils s'exposaient pour J. C., et que ce qu'ils pourroient endurer pour sa cause, leur seroit plus avantageux et plus glorieux que de jeuner longtemps, que de coucher sur la terre, et de pratiquer toutes les autres austeritez dont ils avoient toujours fait leurs délices.⁵⁶

[Following the gift God had given him for pacifying and reuniting all the world, he allied the solitary life to the religious. And joining this spiritual discipline⁵⁷ to the spiritual gift of his priesthood, he so fully united in his own person the peace of solitude with the action and labour of episcopacy, that all were persuaded that the solitary life consisted in the tranquillity and uniformity of actions, rather than separation of the body and exterior withdrawal.

... these solitaires would not answer them a single word, but were content to stretch out their necks to receive the death that was threatened them, being persuaded that in suffering for Athanasius, they were suffering for Christ, and that what they might endure in his cause would be more to their benefit and glory than long fasts, sleep on the bare ground, and the practice of all the austerities which had hitherto been their delight.]

Gibbon saw monks as self-exiled by their hatred of the body from natural human sociability. Tillemont desired only to reduce their self-mortifications and restore them to the practice of religion under a rule. Neither had much respect – Gibbon none – for the monastic life as a rejection of society and its authority, but it is Gibbon more than Tillemont

⁵⁴ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 812. ⁵⁵ *Mémoires*, VIII, p. 182. ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁵⁷ The meaning of 'philosophie' in its monastic setting.

who sees them as active in Athanasius's rebellion. He can even believe that Athanasius as a resistance leader was able to be present – in disguise? with connivance? – at the councils of Seleucia and Rimini, which is hard to reconcile with the idea that Constantius's *agentes* were in search of his life.

The advantage of personally negotiating with his friends, and observing and improving the divisions of his enemies, might justify in a prudent statesman, so bold and dangerous an enterprise; and Alexandria was connected by trade and navigation with every seaport of the Mediterranean.⁵⁸

It is a little hard not to believe that narrative is being guided by rhetoric, and that Gibbon is telling the tale of Athanasius's adventures because it is too good to leave out; but there is a point he desires to make by telling it.

From the depth of his inaccessible retreat the intrepid primate waged an incessant and offensive war against the protector of the Arians; and his seasonable writings, which were diligently circulated and eagerly perused, contributed to unite and animate the orthodox party. In his public apologies, which he addressed to the emperor himself, he sometimes affected the praise of moderation; whilst at the same time, in secret and vehement invectives, he exposed Constantius as a weak and wicked prince, the executioner of his family, the tyrant of the republic, and the Antichrist of the church. In the height of his prosperity, the victorious monarch, who had chastised the rashness of Gallus, and suppressed the revolt of Sylvanus, who had taken the diadem from the head of Vetricio, and vanquished in the field the legions of Magnentius, received from an invisible hand a wound which he could neither heal nor revenge; and the son of Constantine was the first of the Christian princes who experienced the strength of those principles which, in the cause of religion, could resist the most violent exertions of the civil power.⁵⁹

This passage is climactic; it completes what Gibbon has to tell of Athanasius in chapter 21. A regime is being delegitimised by written propaganda, issuing from an underground source and distributed by undetectable agents. This has never happened before and history is narrating it for the first time. It is happening because supernatural religion, expressed in dogmatic beliefs, has appeared in society and created a church whose own authority and legitimacy may be debated only within itself; but the civil authority cannot escape being party to these debates. The product is both liberty and authority. The church may resist the civil power, despotic when it interferes with the church; but the church does so in the exercise of its own authority, which is not that of civil society, and it is Gibbon's unstated yet repeated premise that the church may itself become despotic. His concern in what remains of the chapter is to enquire whether theological controversy has yet brought to Roman government

⁵⁸ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 814. ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

the ‘order and freedom’ mentioned earlier,⁶⁰ or new forms of disorder neither church nor empire can manage.

(III)

The concluding pages of chapter 21⁶¹ – which read rather as if Gibbon was clearing his desk before moving on – are concerned with conditions under which toleration was either impossible or possible. His literary sources are orthodox – no others having survived – and we hear only of the persecution of Trinitarian bishops by Arians; but ‘all Christians except those who were blindly devoted to the Arian faction’, resented the persecution of those ‘who suffered for the truth of their opinions, or at least for the integrity of their conscience’.⁶² The qualification contains, and perhaps conceals, the difficulty Gibbon is seeking to overcome in understanding the history of controversy. In the minds of believers, Christ was not a being about whom one held opinions, but a presence and a mystery who might not be comprehended but must not be misdescribed; and as the Arian position became the anomioian, heresy became any definition of him which denied his mystery and therefore his being. It followed that when Constantius consented to the simultaneous opening of Nicene and Arian churches in Rome,

the ideas of toleration were so repugnant to the practice, and even the sentiments, of those times, that, when the answer of Constantius was publicly read in the Circus of Rome, so reasonable a project of accommodation was rejected with contempt and ridicule. The eager vehemence which animated the spectators in the decisive moment of a horse-race was now directed towards a different object, and the Circus resounded with the shout of thousands, who repeatedly exclaimed ‘One God, One Christ, One Bishop!’⁶³

and homicidal violence very soon followed. Gibbon knows he is looking at a moment to which the toleration of diverse opinions was inadequate and almost irrelevant; but in exploring why this was the case, it is easiest for him to return to the point, made earlier, that the nature of Christ became of direct and passionate concern to urban crowds in Rome, Alexandria and Constantinople, and to consider why the peoples of these cities identified with bishops rather than magistrates, so that dissensions within the republic of bishops became the occasion of civil violence within the empire. This can be explained on two levels, the republican and the imperial. On the one:

⁶⁰ Above, p. 136. ⁶¹ pp. 814–29. ⁶² p. 814. ⁶³ p. 817.

The people regretted the loss of their faithful pastors, whose banishment was usually followed by the intrusion of a stranger into the episcopal chair, and loudly complained that the right of election was violated, and that they were condemned to obey a mercenary usurper, whose person was unknown and whose principles were suspected.⁶⁴

On the other:

The abuse of Christianity introduced into the Roman government causes of tyranny and sedition; the bonds of civil society were torn asunder by the fury of religious factions; and the obscure citizen, who might calmly have surveyed the elevation and fall of successive emperors, imagined and experienced that his own life and fortune were connected with the interests of a popular ecclesiastic. The example of the two capitals, Rome and Constantinople, may serve to represent the state of empire and the temper of mankind under the reign of the sons of Constantine.⁶⁵

One should not hastily conclude that we are looking at an explanation of the Decline and Fall. The turbulence of great cities is not a cause of barbarian settlements, and the rise of a new religion is more a consequence than an explanation of the citizen's indifference to the imperial succession. Gibbon is concerned with the transformation of values as ancient history gives place to modern, and at the same time with the historical problem of order and freedom. The growth of the church as a force independent of empire, he has earlier told us, begins to restore both to an otherwise despotic government;⁶⁶ but the sons of Constantine, largely through their own fault, are confronted with religious freedom as a source of the most violent disorder. In the case of Rome, the return of Liberius after his displacement by the anti-pope Felix 'renewed the horrid image of the massacres of Marius and the proscriptions of Sylla';⁶⁷ in that of Constantinople, the attempt of a non-homoeousian bishop to transfer the remains of Constantine led to a collision in recording which

one of the ecclesiastical historians has observed, as a real fact, not as a figure of rhetoric, that the well before the church overflowed with a stream of blood which filled the porticoes and the adjacent courts. The writer who should impute these tumults solely to a religious principle would betray a very imperfect knowledge of human nature; yet it must be confessed that the motive which misled the sincerity of zeal, and the pretence which disguised the licentiousness of passion, suppressed the remorse which, in another cause, would have succeeded to the rage of the Christians of Constantinople.⁶⁸

The last sentence is one of the few in which Gibbon's balanced and antithetical style threatens to escape his control, and one may wonder whether he was pushing himself to complete a chapter which is close to

⁶⁴ pp. 814–15. ⁶⁵ p. 816. ⁶⁶ Above, p. 136. ⁶⁷ p. 817 ⁶⁸ p. 819.

becoming a loose association of passages. After further accounts of persecution by the Arian emperor and the semi-Arian bishop Macedonius, and the warlike resistance of the Novatians of Paphlagonia, Gibbon sums up with a passage significantly drawn from the writings of Julian,⁶⁹ and turns to give a lurid account of the homicidal and suicidal *circumcelliones* of Donatist Africa.⁷⁰ They of course have nothing to do with the Council of Nicaea and its consequences in the empire as a whole, and Gibbon has been holding back an account which might well have appeared much earlier in these chapters.⁷¹ It is as if he were presenting an anthology of fanaticisms, and at the end of his account he returns to the theme of theology, and takes refuge in the conventional language of toleration.

The fierce and political writers of the times, ascribing *all* virtue to themselves, and imputing *all* guilt to their adversaries, have painted the battle of the angels and daemons. Our calmer reason will reject such pure and perfect monsters of vice or sanctity, and will impute an equal, or at least an indiscriminate, measure of good and evil to the hostile sectaries, who assumed and bestowed the appellations of orthodox and heretics. They had been educated in the same religion and the same civil society. Their hopes and fears in the present, or in a future life, were balanced in the same proportion. On either side the error might be innocent, the faith sincere, the practice meritorious or corrupt. Their passions were excited by similar objects; and they might alternately abuse the favour of the court, or of the people. The metaphysical opinions of the Athanasians and the Arians could not influence their moral character; and they were alike actuated by the intolerant spirit, which has been extracted from the pure and simple maxims of the Gospel.⁷²

Gibbon's language here is more latitudinarian than Enlightened; we might be reading Erasmus or Barbeyrac rather than Hume. It has not been usual with him to fall back on 'the pure and simple maxims of the Gospel', nor does he tell us here what these were, or how an 'intolerant spirit' has been 'extracted' from them. If they were 'maxims' of humility, charity, morality and theism – as was usually the case – he seems to be forgetting that the starting point of the whole terrible story of chapter 21 is a verse of the Gospel, the first of the Fourth, which proposes nothing pure or simple, but the most revolutionary transformation ever offered in the relations between God and humanity. The debate, and the fanaticism, had been attempts to discover what this had been.

The chapter concludes with a review of the attitudes of the sons of Constantine towards the cultic religion of old Rome, known as 'paganism'.⁷³ Here Gibbon reiterates that it was incapable of intolerance, or even

⁶⁹ pp. 820–1. ⁷⁰ pp. 821–3. ⁷¹ Above, p. 85. ⁷² p. 824.

⁷³ See the long footnote 174, which examines the origin and changing uses or misuses of this word; pp. 827–8.

toleration, because its content was mythical, not philosophical, and that the emperors, while condemning it as superstition, did not persecute it as heresy. Raynal is criticised⁷⁴ for believing that they proscribed it – there is no looking ahead to Theodosius, who did – and Constantius for once is shown in a benign role. He is practising toleration, to the extent that paganism says nothing about Christianity; but this is the ‘paganism’ of cultic religion, and the ‘pagan philosophers’ of neo-Platonist Alexandria make no appearance at this point in the *Decline and Fall*. There is, however, a shape of things to come.

The superstition of the senator and of the peasant, of the poet and the philosopher, was derived from different causes; but they met with equal devotion in the temple of the gods. Their zeal was insensibly provoked by the insulting triumph of a proscribed sect; and their hopes were reviewed by the well-grounded confidence that the presumptive heir of the empire, a young and valiant hero, who had delivered Gaul from the arms of the barbarians, had secretly embraced the religion of his ancestors.⁷⁵

For Tillemont, Julian was a passing phenomenon, whose function had been to dissolve the ‘Arian’ structure imposed by Constantius on church and empire. For Gibbon he was, or might have been, something else.

⁷⁴ pp. 824 *et seq.* ⁷⁵ p. 829.

Part III

The Interlude of Julian

8 Gibbon and Julian: the history of an anomaly

(I)

The next three chapters of the *Decline and Fall*, numbered 22 through 24, are radically unlike those which have preceded them – the history of empire and church – and those which will follow them: the history of barbarism and the partial disintegration of empire. The story of Julian the Apostate has only a limited role in the narratives of the Decline and Fall and the accompanying rise and history of the Christian church. For this there are a number of reasons, the first being that this story is almost a counter-history, and certainly a history of things which might have happened but did not. Julian might have transformed the structure of imperial rule; he might have disestablished Christianity and based the empire on a religion of philosophic paganism; he might have destroyed Persian empire in the Euphrates and Tigris basins. None of these things happened, however, and the reasons why they did not seem not to include structural changes in either the imperial or the ecclesiastical systems of which Gibbon has been and will be writing. The three chapters are virtually a history of the counter-factual, and this affects our enquiry into the kinds of history he is writing and its bases in the changing practices of historiography in the eighteenth century. Why did he write the history of Julian as he did, and what has this to tell us about the kind of historian he was? The answers to these questions, we are already aware, may lie at a distance from those given to similar questions when asked of other chapters in Gibbon's history.

The fact that Julian failed at everything he undertook transfers emphasis to questions of personality as well as policy; why did he attempt what he did and why did he fail at it? These questions, however, would not have involved Gibbon in writing three chapters about a reign of nineteen months,¹ but for three attendant circumstances: that Julian's was an extraordinary personality, that the history of its taking shape was an

¹ As he does not fail to emphasise; see Womersley, 1994, I, p. 852.

extraordinary history, and that the history of his personality, his actions and his death was recorded in an extraordinary historiographic literature. If we ask why Gibbon wrote the history of Julian as he did, the first answer must be that he was still a pre-modern historian, obliged to report, review and retell the histories he had before him, and that these did much to determine the content and character of the chapters he wrote. The fact that the history of Julian is almost extraneous to the history of the Decline and Fall, and does little to explain it, may matter more to us than it did to Gibbon.

We need then to consider the historical literature – not only the historiography, but the literature from which historical information was gained – used by Gibbon in writing his chapters on Julian. In the first place there are writings by Julian himself, distributed and preserved in his own time, and later by diligent Byzantine copyists.² None of these is a history, though some contain narratives of historical events; they belong in various categories, letters, panegyrics, treatises, satires, recognised by the rhetorical and philosophical culture of the late empire, to which Julian himself belonged. We have to consider, not only their diverse characters as products of that culture, but Julian as an inhabitant of the same culture, endeavouring to express himself and communicate with others in the forms and through the media which it permitted. This is the case both before and after he becomes emperor, so that we have to distinguish between the writings – and their modes of composition, articulation and publication – in which Julian is addressing his friends as a private person, or engaging in the semi-public activities of rhetoric and philosophy, and those in which he is, sometimes disastrously, addressing his subjects in the role of philosophic ruler. Julian is his own historian, but it is often a problem for historians to determine what he was writing and doing.

Then there is the historian who was Julian's immediate contemporary: Ammianus Marcellinus, who knew him as his officer, witnessed the end of his life, and for Gibbon played the role of the last historian to whom classical standards applied.³ Though not the sole figure of Ammianus's surviving histories, Julian is their hero. Heroes are not above criticism in classical historiography, but their portraits are constructed according to the conventions of rhetoric, and Gibbon no less than Ammianus employs these conventions in writing about him. As has been remarked already,⁴ however, Julian's intense self-awareness transforms all that he writes, or others down to Gibbon write about him, and the literature of historiography becomes a record of the equally intense attraction and exasperation

² Wright, 1913/2002. ³ Above, pp. 56–57. ⁴ Above, pp. 56–57.

with which all writers – even Julian himself? – respond to his personality. It is this which makes chapters 22 through 24 unlike any others in the *Decline and Fall*.

Libanius, ‘the sophist of Antioch’ – ‘sophist’ was not a term of dispraise, but meant a publicly recognised exponent of rhetoric and in some senses philosophy – knew Julian well, especially during his unhappy sojourn at Antioch in the winter of 362–3, grieved bitterly at his death, and died saddened in a world he as a pagan had hoped Julian would avert. Since his orations, some never delivered and all circulated and surviving in written form,⁵ include panegyrics and funerary laments containing much narrative, he ranks among Gibbon’s (and our) historiographic sources; but he is a rhetorician and occasionally a historian, whereas it may be said that Ammianus is the reverse. Together they dominate Gibbon’s chapters and ensure that these are written largely in the late humanist mode. Once again, however, Julian’s presence, in his writings and theirs, ensures that this cultural tradition is dominated, at this moment in its history, by the subjectivity of a single personality.

To a modern historian, however, Libanius is not only a rhetorician, but a source of information about the rhetorical, philosophic and religious culture in which he and Julian both lived, and which Julian tried to obey, defend and exploit in the exercise of his rule as an emperor. Reading the two authors together, we see how Julian operated as an orator in purple, and how the culture of rhetoric responded to him. This is peculiarly the case with Libanius’s desperate attempts to remedy the huge error in public relations made by Julian in writing and then publishing the *Misopogon* as a satire on both himself and the citizens of Antioch to whom he presented it;⁶ we see Julian acting in a culture which had its own conventions, was changing, and was resisting his attempts to reverse change. Insofar as we can read Gibbon as exploring this situation, we can read the relevant literature as supplying a historical context.

We have then the portrait of Julian as a philosopher emperor – Gibbon’s explanation of how he came to be both began in chapter 19 – operating in and through a culture of rhetoric to which he belongs and subscribes. Philosophy is inseparable from religion, and Julian’s ‘apostasy’ – his rejection of Christianity in which he was brought up – entails his embrace of a philosophy which was also a theology. To the Enlightened mind, a *théologien-philosophe* was, as Gibbon remarked, ‘a strange centaur’;⁷ but this is precisely what Julian was, and a history of philosophy was called for

⁵ Norman, 1969/1987. ⁶ Norman, 1969/1987, I, pp. 209–51.

⁷ *DF*, II, ch. 23, n. 51. For La Bléterie’s use of the term see his *Histoire de Jovien*, 1748, p. xxxii.

to explain it. Julian's own writings contain this in the form of autobiography and Platonic rhapsody, but Gibbon also possessed a Christian source – the ferociously hostile account given by Gregory of Nazianzus,⁸ who knew Julian as a student and hated him very much – and the rudiments of a pagan history of philosophy: the *Lives of the Sophists* by Eunapius of Sardis, who also wrote a longer study of Julian now lost, though it may have been used by both Ammianus and Zosimus.⁹ Here we encounter the central problems posed for Gibbon by the 'apostasy': Julian as a figure in the history of neo-Platonism, and neo-Platonism as a force in the histories of both philosophy and Christianity. Readers of this series have met with this in the writings of both Tillemont¹⁰ and Mosheim¹¹ (to say nothing of Gibbon's account of the origins of the problem of the Logos and the Son). Tillemont and Mosheim will both have been in Gibbon's mind as he wrote these chapters, and the former's *Histoire des Empereurs* is a major early modern source for his account of Julian's reign. He also possessed, and used exhaustively, the two volumes in which the Abbé de la Bléterie had written lives of Julian and his successor Jovian.¹² La Bléterie declared himself a follower of Tillemont, and to some extent shared his Jansenism. We therefore have specimens of the pre-Enlightened Christian view of Julian; but there is nothing from Le Clerc and not much from Warburton,¹³ and Gibbon is to be seen recoiling from Julian's brand of neo-Platonism before he has recounted his career. *Philosophes* found it possible¹⁴ to situate him in a tradition of freethinking and Enlightenment, in which he appears simply as a benign ruler, tolerant because he was a philosopher and a philosopher because he was tolerant – the two terms being more or less interchangeable. Voltaire is the culmination of this tradition, and Diderot attempted to present neo-Platonism as the forerunner of modern philosophy; but this was not the view of Tillemont, Mosheim, Brucker, Warburton, or any serious historian of philosophy or theology. Gibbon wrote in their tradition, not that of Enlightenment in the conventional sense, and deferred such questions until he had dealt with Julian as a civil ruler.

⁸ English translations of Gregory's *Invectives against Julian* are to be found (apparently only) in King, 1888, accompanied by a robustly Victorian commentary. See further McGuckin, 2001.

⁹ Wright, 1989; Bowersock, 1978, pp. 7–9. It is thought to have been based on a memoir written by Oribasius, Julian's physician and intimate, a witness to his last hours of life.

¹⁰ *RFT*, pp. 73–8. ¹¹ *RFT*, pp. 197–209. ¹² La Bléterie, 1735, 1746, 1746a, 1748.

¹³ See however Warburton, 1751.

¹⁴ Spink, 1967, sets out the *philosophe* reading of Julian through Voltaire to Diderot.

(II)

Chapter 19 had already related Julian's life from his infancy to his wintering at Lutetia-Paris after his campaign against the Franks and Alamanni. Gibbon had studied several aspects of his career, but not yet the growth of those intellectual powers and convictions which were to make him an extraordinary ruler, ecclesiastical as well as civil. The principal context in which chapter 19 develops is one which recurs in Gibbon's volumes though he does not here isolate it for study: the context of succession to the principate. It will be recalled¹⁵ that Constantine had left too many heirs behind him: too many Caesars, in Diocletianic terms, who might compete for the powers of an Augustus and the right to assume the name. His death had been followed by a massacre of his half-brothers and nephews,¹⁶ including Julian's father, and the sharing of empire between his three sons, whose frontier wars and involvement in the disputes of the church Gibbon had studied in ensuing chapters. It was and perhaps is not clear how far the brothers had been parties to the murder of their kindred, but it is quite clear that Gibbon knew he was dealing with a problem recurrent in Roman history, for which there existed no law of succession and perhaps no solution. He had remarked that Constantine II, Constans and Constantius all suffered the disadvantage of having been born in the purple and bred in the palace, so that none of them had learned how to rule from experience; but the armies insisted on hereditary succession, and what alternative was there? The *Decline and Fall* takes its departure from the death of Marcus Aurelius, last of a line of emperors bringing happiness to mankind because they had been nominated by predecessors able to choose them from a military and civil elite of recognised legitimacy. Marcus, a benign ruler, a reasonably successful general, and a philosopher who meditated upon himself in widely circulated writings, was a model figure for Julian until their philosophies diverged; but he had left a palace-bred son behind him who could not be denied the succession to an office in which he showed himself a tyrant.¹⁷

The sequence of nominated successors had never been restored. There had ensued an anarchy of military usurpers raised to the purple by soldiers, which Diocletian, restoring the empire by changing its structure, had tried to regulate by a system in which soldier Augusti shared supreme power and had Caesares to succeed them. These, however, had fought among themselves, and what was Constantine the second transformer of

¹⁵ Above, p. 47.

¹⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus speaks of the army 'making a revolution through their apprehension of a revolution' (King, 1888, p. 21).

¹⁷ *DF*, I, chs. 3 and 4; Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 99–104, 110–13; *FDF*, pp. 442–7.

empire but a successful usurper from the frontiers who must now be succeeded by his sons? Hence the still obscure massacre of the lesser Caesars, the uneasy relations between the brothers, and the wholly unsurprising assumption of the purple by the rebel Magnentius. He being suppressed, Constantius found himself the survivor of three Augusti, none of whom had left a son, or a Caesar, to succeed him.

It is clearly stated in all the narratives that after the massacre the children Gallus and Julian were permitted to survive their father because they were the only living males of the lineage of Constantine, and that a hereditary successor must be found if a war of succession was to be avoided. But we now enter the world of 'oriental' or 'palace' despotism, in which a more or less recognised successor may be feared and resented by the reigning monarch – both with and without good reason – to the point where filicide and parricide became realities. Constantine himself had executed his son Crispus, and Constantius's relations first with Gallus and then with Julian came close to the same level of mistrust. The surviving books of Ammianus Marcellinus open by relating how Gallus as nominated Caesar develops a tyrant's personality and has to be put to death by a cabal of eunuchs who have gained the imperial ear. Julian has reason to fear for his life, but the empress Eusebia – here we find a woman exercising power benignly in palace politics – persuades Constantius, first that he needs a nominal successor, second that Julian can be groomed for that role while remaining a student at Athens, and third, at a later date, that he can be invested with the title of Caesar and given nominal command of the armies in Gaul, where barbarians called in against Magnentius are occupying too much territory west of the lower Rhine.¹⁸

Julian has escaped the fate of a prince bred in the palace, but it is at this point that his role becomes dangerous to the empire and himself. Even the nominal command of troops by a Caesar is enough to arouse the insecurity of an Augustus, and this is magnified as Julian is seen to develop an aptitude for commanding them in the field. The immediate point for the student of Julian, however, is that at Athens and even earlier he has learned philosophy and learned to consider himself a philosopher. From this moment the historiography includes the history of Julian's successive self-images, related by himself. Gibbon has only to follow his writings and those of Ammianus to tell us how he dreaded what might happen to a philosopher in a world of power, intrigue and war, and how he then realised that he must look beyond survival and become a Platonic philosopher-king. Was this image necessary or superfluous? The vertigo

¹⁸ For this series of interventions by Eusebia, see ch. 19; Womersley, 1994, 1, pp. 693–5.

of his situation increases, of course, as he learns to enjoy victory in the field; that the ideal philosopher must also become a captain and conqueror is not unthinkable, but is not necessary. Chapter 19 has taken us through these phases of self-discovery or self-creation. It is not, however, a full history of Julian's exposure to philosophy since his adolescence, the process necessary to our understanding of his revulsion against Christian empire and Christian religion. Perhaps this is not central to his experience, or his development, in Gaul. Gibbon, however, will tell us of it only when he has completed his account of Julian's seizure of power and his exercise of civil authority as emperor. We are looking at yet another instance of Gibbon's practice of deferring the history of religion, and with it philosophy, until he has dealt with the narrative of civil government. Modern historians of Julian try to deal with all three harnessed abreast, not in tandem.

The Caesar is acclaimed Augustus, and forced to assume the diadem and the purple, by the legions of Gaul at Paris, in consequence of Constantine's demand that some of them be transferred to the east. Ammianus follows Julian's account of his agony of mind when faced by the soldiers' demands, and historians to the present day debate how far he was sincere in this.¹⁹ The scenario of acclamation by provincial armies was so well known, however, that it is easy to imagine him knowing exactly what would happen and what choices he must face, so that the question of sincerity may become moot. After the usual offers of partnership to Constantius – offers he could make both in good faith and in the certainty that they would be refused – he resolved to seize the central provinces before Constantius could return from facing the Persians. By quick marches from the sources of the Rhine to those of the Danube,²⁰ he reached and occupied Sirmium, the capital of the region of Illyricum and third capital of the empire. Here we must use our imagination. Julian was in very much the situation of Magnentius twelve years before, and may well have been uneasily conscious of his own panegyric, describing how the armour and missile weapons of the eastern armies had smashed through the legions of Gaul at Mursa; in addition to which regiments loyal to Constantius were garrisoning the city of Aquileia, controlling the passes into Italy, in his rear. Historians from Ammianus to Gibbon dwell on the confidence of victory with which Constantius was marching west, when he

¹⁹ Ammianus 20, 4; *DF*, ch. 22; Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 830–6; Bowersock, 1978, ch. 5; Matthews, 1989, pp. 93–9; Athanassiadi, 1992, pp. 71–5.

²⁰ All historians comment on the speed and secrecy of Julian's progress through unknown and unmapped territory. Athanassiadi, 1992, p. 78. Gibbon, ch. 22, n. 30, compares it – or says a modern divine might – to the supernatural speed of Milton's Satan, 'another apostate' (Womersley, 1994, I, p. 844n.). It might be rash to see here an early instance of romantic admiration for Satan; Gibbon is no Blake or Byron.

died unexpectedly of a fever in Asia Minor. The armies east and west accepted Julian and escorted him as emperor into Constantinople. No wild-card claimant assumed the purple, and it is clear that dynastic legitimacy was still trumps.²¹ It is even recorded that Constantius on his deathbed nominated Julian as his successor; and true or not, the dark ambivalences of the imperial succession make this not impossible. At all events Julian's accession was legitimate and unchallengeable; but there was an unexpected consequence. The reign of philosophy could now begin. Gibbon's account of Julian's civil government occupies the rest of chapter 22.

(III)

Philosophy had instructed Julian to compare the advantages of action and retirement; but the elevation of his birth and the accidents of his life never allowed him the freedom of choice. He might perhaps sincerely have preferred the groves of the Academy and the society of Athens;²² but he was constrained, at first by the will, and afterwards by the injustice of Constantius, to expose his person and fame to the dangers of Imperial greatness; and to make himself accountable to the world and to posterity for the happiness of millions. Julian recollected with terror the observation of his master Plato, that the government of our flocks and herds is always committed to beings of a superior species; and that the conduct of nations requires and deserves the celestial powers of the Gods or the Genii. From this principle he justly concluded that the man who presumes to reign should aspire to the perfection of the divine nature; that he should purify his soul from her mortal and terrestrial part; that he should extinguish his appetites, enlighten his understanding, regulate his passions, and subdue the wild beast which, according to the lively metaphor of Aristotle, seldom fails to ascend the throne of a despot.²³

Gibbon's Julian is giving himself advice which might echo the Stoic self-discipline of Marcus Aurelius; but it is to be found, as Gibbon's footnotes make clear, in the epistle Julian addressed about this time²⁴ to the Aristotelian philosopher and rhetor Themistius, which contains implications rather more alarming than Gibbon allows to appear. In it Julian sets out a pagan philosophy of the universe, as pervaded at all points by a living intelligence sometimes embodied in gods or genii, *daimones* or (said the Christians) demons in the diabolic sense of the word. The rulers of

²¹ Gibbon: 'an army which now abhorred the thought of civil discord'. Womersley, 1994, I, p. 849.

²² The word 'society' catches the eye. In eighteenth-century London or Paris, it could indicate an Enlightened project of making philosophy sociable rather than academic (*EEG*, pp. 106–9; above, p. 63; but this was not an objective in fourth-century Athens. How has Gibbon come to include it here?

²³ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 850–1. ²⁴ Wright, 1913/2002, II, pp. 199–239.

nations are not to think themselves gods; they are to subject their souls and bodies to the disciplines of philosophy; but this does not debar them from calling on the 'gods and genii' to inspire and assist them in 'the perfection of the divine nature'. In the epistle to Themistius we are some way towards the point where Julian's 'master' is not only Plato but Iamblichus, and philosophy has begun to become theurgy, the philosopher's power to immerse himself in the divine intelligence to the point where he can call the gods to his side and even command them to do that which they would not do without him. At this point, or even before it was reached, Christian authors have already been seen denouncing the Platonists of Alexandria as thaumaturges and magicians; Tillemont had condemned Plotinus to eternal torment on this count.²⁵ Gibbon, it may be seen, does not go so far in this passage or elsewhere; but he already knew that Julian had taken as a third master Maximus of Ephesus, a philosopher and thaumaturge who remained with him to the last moments of his life and brought him close to commanding the gods themselves.

Gibbon says nothing of these matters in chapter 22; they are reserved till chapter 23, when the study of Julian's neo-Platonism becomes part of the study of his apostasy from Christianity. Characteristically, he defers Julian's religious beliefs and policies until he has given an account of his civil governments in which they do not appear; but the study of personality is still uppermost, and the passage just quoted ends with the remark:

The throne of Julian, which the death of Constantius fixed on an independent basis, was the seat of reason, of virtue, and perhaps of vanity.²⁶

Julian was a self-obsessed man, and even his praise of the self-discipline of philosophy is not free from self-admiration; but is 'vanity' Gibbon's way of avoiding the possibility that Julian thought that in him the universe was governing itself? The charge of enthusiasm will not be long in appearing, and the belief that the pagan gods were active intelligences will add that of superstition. For the present, however, personality and policy will exhaust the subject of Julian's civil government.

Personality precedes policy. From the suggestion of vanity, Gibbon proceeds directly to

the rigorous laws which [the] philosophic emperor imposed upon himself.

A vegetarian and sexual abstainer, he

left his mind and body always free and active for the various and important business of an author, a pontiff, a magistrate, a general, and a prince. In one and the

²⁵ *RFT*, p. 75. ²⁶ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 851.

same day he gave audience to several ambassadors, and wrote or dictated a great number of letters to his generals, his civil magistrates, his private friends, and the different cities of his dominions. He listened to the memorials which had been received, considered the subject of the petitions, and signified his intentions more rapidly than they could be taken in shorthand by the diligence of his secretaries. He possessed such flexibility of thought, and such firmness of attention, that he could employ his hand to write, his ear to listen, and his voice to dictate; and pursue at once three several trains of ideas without hesitation, and without error.²⁷

Is there something manic and hyperactive about this portrait, and does Gibbon wish to convey its presence? Many an absolute monarch from Louis XIV onwards was known for his capacity to spend hours at the desk of a bureaucrat; but Julian is driving himself beyond human capacity. Certainly, he is neither an ancient classical nor a modern Enlightened figure, for both knew the moral as well as the physical necessity of *otium*, and it is this which Gibbon's Julian is denying himself, while making a Platonic return to the Cave.²⁸ Gibbon too is driven by the weight and diversity of Julian's surviving writings, and is aware that as many of them are private and philosophical as are public and imperial. When are they addressed to the *res publica*, and when to some rhetorical-philosophical *république des lettres*, and is it possible that Julian sometimes confuses the two?

The actions of Julian can only be preserved by the care of the historian; but the portion of his voluminous writings which is still extant remains as a monument of the application, as well as of the genius, of the emperor. The *Misopogon*, the *Caesars*, several of his orations, and his elaborate work against the Christian religion, were composed in the long nights of the two winters, the former of which he passed at Constantinople, and the latter at Antioch.²⁹

We shall learn in a future chapter that at Antioch, in the *Misopogon*, he confused his private and public *personae*, and satirised himself in the attempt to satirise his subjects, who were inclined to think him ridiculous already. Neither as philosopher nor as emperor need he have been the compulsive self-portrayer Gibbon is describing; but this must be understood in connection with his antagonism to Christianity, and Gibbon is deferring the apostate until he has finished with the prince.

When he turns to Julian's government, as displayed by his decrees and legislation as well as by the historians and orators – he makes use of the *Codex Theodosianus* and of Godefroy's commentaries upon it – the

²⁷ pp. 851–2.

²⁸ This may have occurred as early as his taking the role of Caesar in Gaul; Athanassiadi, 1992, pp. 55–7.

²⁹ pp. 852–3.

emphasis still falls on Julian's attempts to change the image and character of emperorship as displayed by himself. 'The reformation of the Imperial court was one of the first and most necessary acts of the government of Julian';³⁰ and we hear of his disbandment of the innumerable menials who had proliferated around the palace.³¹ These are the parasites appearing in chapter 17,³² and Julian proceeds to disband the *agentes in rebus*, the secret police of the regime, and the *notarii* who kept files to the undoing of its subjects.³³ But there is no mention of the *illustres*, *spectabiles* and *clarissimi*, the 'titled slaves on the steps of the throne', who made government from Constantinople a 'splendid theatre' of ritualised bureaucracy;³⁴ is the account of them given in chapter 17 the prospect of a future which has yet to take shape? 'Julian was not insensible of the advantages of freedom ... He sincerely abhorred the system of oriental despotism which Diocletian, Constantine, and the patient habits of four score years, had established in the empire';³⁵ but Gibbon has less to say about any programme of de-bureaucratisation – indeed, he is inclined to think Julian went too far and too fast in what he did attempt³⁶ – than about Julian's personal style. He attempts to behave as a republican magistrate, deferential to the consuls and subject to the laws, but his incorrigible overacting in this role³⁷ merely embarrasses senators who know they are not his equals and do not want to be treated as such. He tries to make the senate at Constantinople the equal in majesty of that at Rome (which he never visits) but as the latter has for decades been no more than a fiction sustained by its wealthy members, he is not free from the theatricality which has become the curse of Roman civil government. And recent historians have raised a further question: how far did Julian see himself as a republican magistrate equal with his fellow citizens, and how far as a philosopher-king returned to the Cave and unable to abdicate his higher wisdom?³⁸ Is this Gibbon's insistence on his 'vanity' in modern dress?

At this point arises the vision of the one reform Julian may have been attempting, which in the view of some historians suggests a radical restoration of the empire to a former character.

From Constantinople the attention of the monarch was extended to the municipal senates of the provinces. He abolished, by repeated edicts, the unjust and pernicious exemptions which had withdrawn so many idle citizens from the service of their country; and by imposing an equal distribution of public duties, he restored

³⁰ *Ibid.* ³¹ pp. 853–4. ³² Above, p. 47. ³³ pp. 857–8. ³⁴ Above, p. 27.

³⁵ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 858–9.

³⁶ pp. 854–5. Note Gibbon's move from Julian's policy to his image.

³⁷ pp. 859–60, 862. ³⁸ Athanassiadi, 1992, pp. 16–17, 35, 64–5, 113 n. 132.

the strength, the splendour, or, according to the glowing expression of Libanius, the soul of the expiring cities of his empire.³⁹

Gibbon here lays a tentative finger on what might have been his most profound explanation of the Decline and Fall itself. In a past it was easy to idealise, some at least of the Mediterranean cities had been *poleis*, ruled by citizen elites possessed of political and military virtue; it was the loss of the latter, consequent on the universal empire of one city, that was leading to military dictatorship, corruption and barbarisation. During the short-lived silver age of Trajan and the Antonines, the cities of the empire had still been governed by native-born elites, who collected and helped pay the taxes, maintained the splendour of the cities and displayed their own virtue by the voluntary but expected benefactions known as 'liturgies'; Gibbon had chosen Aelius Aristides as example of this.⁴⁰ In the third century, however, power had disastrously passed to the armies of the frontiers, maintained by an increasingly crushing burden of taxation, and the municipal elites had been conscripted into collecting this and made personally responsible for its payment. They had degenerated into *curiales* and *decuriones* performing a ruinous service they sought to avoid and could only be compelled to assume, and the efficiency of the system had degenerated correspondingly. Gibbon had described this at length in an earlier chapter,⁴¹ and the passage from Libanius just mentioned has encouraged recent historians to credit Julian with the ambition to restore the cities to something like the status of *poleis*, governed by freely operating municipal senates;⁴² a goal which clearly could not be reached without radical reform of the whole system of taxation, of which Gibbon has nothing to say here. Yet he had dealt at some perhaps rhetorical length with Julian's lessening of the burden of taxation during his administration in Gaul;⁴³ and above all, his accounts of both Diocletian's and Constantine's systems of imperial government had approached while avoiding the statements that over-taxation and the problems that caused it were principal causes of the Decline and Fall itself.⁴⁴ The problems of curial recruitment were inseparable from those of taxation, and if Julian was to be made an actor in the master narrative of Gibbon's history, what ancient and modern historians had to say about his attempts to reform imperial government should be introduced here. Yet Gibbon seems anything but whole-hearted about crediting Julian with any such policy. The account of his restoration of the cities which follows the

³⁹ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 860. ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 71–4. ⁴¹ Above, pp. 40–41.

⁴² Bowersock, 1978, pp. 72–4; Athanassiadi, 1992, pp. 29, 50–1, 98–112.

⁴³ Above, p. 62; Athanassiadi, 1992, pp. 58–60. ⁴⁴ *FDF*, pp. 475–84.

passage last quoted is simply a tale of how his Homeric classicism led him to bestow privileges and exemptions on cities famous in epic poetry; and more is said about his abolition of exemption from municipal office than about his attempts to restore its freedom and dignity. The verdict on his reign will continue to charge him with rendering it ruinous and compulsory;⁴⁵ and above all, the reference to ‘the glowing expression of Libanius’ has appended to it the following footnote:

See Libanius, Ammianus, and the Theodosian Code with Godefroy’s Commentary [Gibbon’s page references omitted]. Yet the whole subject of the *Curia*, notwithstanding very ample materials, still remains the most obscure in the legal history of the empire.⁴⁶

It is not usual to find Gibbon confessing that a major subject of research, central to the history he is writing, is too vast and complicated for him to pursue; yet that seems to be what is happening here. Gibbon’s source must be the Codex; Ammianus in fact says that the burden of office continued in Julian’s time to be extended to those normally exempt;⁴⁷ and Gibbon appears in effect to be giving up the subject. Chapter 22 reverts to the study of Julian’s personality, and concludes, after suggesting that he might have done better as minister, general, or of course philosopher, than as emperor:

When we inspect with minute, or perhaps malevolent, attention the portrait of Julian something seems wanting to the grace and perfection of the whole figure. His genius was less powerful and sublime than that of Caesar, nor did he possess the consummate prudence of Augustus. The virtues of Trajan appear more steady and natural and the philosophy of Marcus is more simple and consistent.⁴⁸

These words merely apply to Julian the standard of judgement he himself employed in his *Caesares*, and perhaps do not convey what it was about him that Gibbon found baffling and disappointing. Nor do they arrive at the central anomaly of his reign.

Even faction, and religious faction, was constrained to acknowledge the superiority of his genius in peace as well as in war, and to confess, with a sigh, that the apostate Julian was a lover of his country, and that he deserved the empire of the world.⁴⁹

And a concluding footnote⁵⁰ quotes – as La Bléterie had done before Gibbon⁵¹ – lines on Julian by the Christian poet Prudentius that end

⁴⁵ Ammianus, 25, 3, 15–20. ⁴⁶ *DF*, II, ch. 22, n. 77; Womersley, 1994, I, p. 860n.

⁴⁷ Ammianus, 22, 9. The reformer is being charged with continuing the system he fails to abolish.

⁴⁸ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 863. ⁴⁹ *Ibid.* ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, n. 85.

⁵¹ In all editions of the *Vie de Julien*.

perfidus ille Deo, quamvis non perfidus orbi (false to his God though not to the world he ruled). Gibbon is departing from historiographic practice in giving his summary of the hero's good and bad qualities before he has arrived at his death. That is two chapters away. Only his civil rule has been considered, and the portrait of the apostate must follow.

(I)

If Ammianus Marcellinus predominates among late antique authorities for Gibbon's account of the period after Constantine and the reign of Julian in particular, almost the only modern shaping Gibbon's vision of that reign is the abbé Jean Philippe René de la Bléterie¹ (1696–1772). His *Vie de l'empereur Julien* was first published in 1735, and reprinted in 1746; an English translation appeared in the same year.² His *Histoire* (a significant variation) *de l'empereur Jovien*, Julian's short-lived successor, appeared in 1748 and is much used by Gibbon, less for its account of Jovian than for the French translations it contains of several key works by Julian: the *Banquet of the Caesars*, the *Misopogon*, and what remains of the treatise *Against the Galilaeans*. La Bléterie and his translator were both thoughtful historians, who reflected on their subject and on the species of historiography they were obliged to write; this helps us to understand the use Gibbon made of La Bléterie and the ways in which he differed from or followed him.³ The abbé tells us immediately that his original purpose was to produce a French translation of Julian's writings more satisfactory than that supplied by Ezekiel Spanheim;⁴ indeed, he first intended no more than a preface to them, but was obliged to enlarge it into a book because the character of his author was so enigmatic as to necessitate the writing of a life.

Plus que j'ai étudié Julien, soit dans ses propres écrits, soit dans les autres monumens de l'antiquité, plus il m'a paru intéressant. Le contraste de ses vices reels et de ses vertus apparentes, joint à la diversité de ses situations et de ses aventures

¹ The name is sometimes spelt 'Bletterie'; I follow Gibbon and Womersley. See Womersley, 1994, III, p. 231; La Bléterie, 1735, 1746, 1746a, 1748.

² 1746a. There is a Dublin pirate edition of the same year, giving the translator's name as Desvieux.

³ French quotations in these chapters are from La Bléterie, 1735; English translations from 1746a.

⁴ Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1263.

[*sic* – a modern spelling would be ‘aventures’], forme un morceau d’histoire où l’on trouve, avec la plus exacte vérité, le merveilleux des fictions. Si le tableau est amusant, il n’est pas moins instructif.⁵

[The more I have studied Julian, either in his own writings, or in the other monuments of antiquity, the more I found myself interested in him. The contrast of his real vices with his seeming virtues, with the variety of incidents and adventures that attended him, form a small piece of history, in which is to be found the strictness of history, with the surprise of fiction. If the picture is amusing, it is not the less instructive.⁶]

From the last sentence La Bléterie predictably goes on to pass a Christian judgement on Julian’s apostasy; but he has already made it clear that the imagination of the historian is fascinated even as his judgement is demanded. Gibbon, we remember, had named these two as the ‘nobler faculties’ to be exercised in historical writing. La Bléterie continues:

Au fond, on ne doit pas s’imaginer qu’il soit toujours impossible de concilier les Auteurs, qui ont parlé le plus diversement de Julien. Comme ils en disent, il ne l’ont pas regardé dans le même point de vuë, il est vrai, des choses fort différentes, mais qui ne sont pas toujours opposés: et pour l’ordinaire, si les Chrétiens et les Paiëns paroissent se contredire, c’est que Julien étoit lui-même un amas de contradictions. M. Fleury observe judicieusement, qu’il y avoit dans ce Prince un tel mélange de bonnes et de mauvaises qualités, qu’il étoit facile de le louer et de blâmer, sans altérer la vérité.⁷

[We must not imagine that it is always impossible to reconcile the authors who have spoken the most differently of Julian. As they have not looked upon him in the same point of light,⁸ they say, it must be allowed, very different things of him, but not always entirely opposite; and, for the generality, if the Christians and Pagans appear to contradict each other, it is because Julian himself was a heap of contradictions. M. Fleury observes judiciously, ‘that there was in this prince such a mixture of good and bad qualities, that it is easy both to praise and to censure him, without any violation of truth’.⁹

Fleury had pronounced a very similar judgement on Constantine himself, but that emperor does not confront us with the enigma of personality, very often pronounced in his own words, that we meet in Julian; we return to the point, touched on earlier,¹⁰ that the history of Julian is a ‘sentimental’ history of personality and subjectivity, like no other in the *Decline and Fall*. La Bléterie’s final judgement is predictable:

Je trouve qu’il ne fut point un grand homme, mais un homme singulier.¹¹

⁵ La Bléterie, 1735, pp. vi–vii. The word ‘amusant’ is being used in its eighteenth-century sense.

⁶ 1746a, pp. vi–vii. ⁷ 1735, pp. xi–xii.

⁸ *Sic*; a confusion between ‘from the same point of view’ and ‘in the same light’?

⁹ 1746a, p. viii. ¹⁰ Above, pp. 56–57, 148–49. ¹¹ 1735, p. 2.

More fully in the English:

[after having precisely distinguished the apostate from the philosopher and the emperor, I find he was not so much a great man, as a singular one.¹²]

It is in Julian's apostasy that his singularity is displayed, and this will have to be considered; but first there is the question of the kind of historiography called for by the history of personality.

Quoique les événemens aux quelles il eut part soient intéressans, et qu'ils semblent, par leur variété assoris à la bizarrerie de son caractère, je n'y toucherais qu'autant qu'ils serviroient à faire connoître sa personne, parce que je n'écris pas son Histoire, mais sa Vie.¹³

[Though the events in which he bore a part may be interesting, and seem, by their variety, to correspond with the oddness of his turn of mind, yet I shall only touch upon them so far as to make his person known, because it is his life I write, not his history.¹⁴]

Jovian, neither a great man nor a singular one, may be the subject of an *histoire*, in which his actions are recounted and his good or bad qualities as a ruler estimated; but Julian must be the subject of a *vie*, in which his actions are seen as the effects of his personality and the writer's aim is to portray that personality in its fullness. It may still be necessary to supply him with an *histoire*, as we know that Ammianus has done; and we may go further and wonder whether Julian's singularity, and perhaps his tragedy, was that his *histoire* was determined by his *vie*, his actions by the history of his personality. La Blérierie has here a literary model to whose authority he can appeal; he quotes Amyot's Plutarch as saying that

les plus hauts et les plus glorieux exploits ne sont pas toujours ceux qui monstrent mieux le vice ou la vertu de l'homme, ains bien souvent une légère chose, une parole ou un jeu, mettent plus clairement en evidence le naturel des personnes, que ne sont pas des défaites où il sera demeuré dix milles hommes morts, ni les gros batailles, ni les prises des villes par siege ni par assault . . .¹⁵

[The greatest and most glorious exploits . . . are not always the surest indications of the vices or virtues of the man; often a slight circumstance, a word or repartee, give stronger proof of his natural turn, than his defeating ten thousands, than pitched battles, or besieged cities . . .¹⁶]

and adds:

. . . aussi nous doit-on concéder que nous aillions principalement recherchant les signes de l'ame, et par iceux formant un portrait au naturel de la vie et les moeurs,

¹² 1746a, p. 2. ¹³ 1735, p. 4. ¹⁴ 1746a, p. 3. ¹⁵ 1735, p. xv. ¹⁶ 1746a, p. ix.

d'un chacun, en laissant aux historiens à écrire les guerres, les batailles et autres telles grandeurs.¹⁷

[so we should be allowed principally to study the specific marks of the soul, and from thence to draw a true copy of the life and manners of each person we treat of; leaving wars, battles and other actions of *éclat* to the historian's province.¹⁸]

Plutarch is the key to the historiography of personality in the ancient world, though it might be added that his *Lives* are those of heroes and failures in the *polis* and the *res publica*, whose values had been challenged by philosophy but not yet by Christianity. Even the apostate was responding to a spiritual challenge which deepened his subjectivity. More immediately, Julian had attempted great sieges, battles and other actions of *éclat*, and there was an *histoire* to be demanded of him as well as a *vie*. La Bléterie could not rigorously separate the one from the other.

The key to Julian's life as well as his history was his apostasy from Christianity; and here it must be noted that for La Bléterie apostasy was both the cause and the effect of singularity of personality. Julian apostasised because he insisted on going his own way to the shaping of himself – La Bléterie and his translator were well aware that the dreadful circumstances of his early life might have imposed this upon him as a necessity – and this was in the end incompatible with the Christian personality. Language occurs here which explains why Gibbon must see La Bléterie as activated by 'religious prejudice'. From the remark about the strictness of history and the surprise of fiction, he goes on:

On y voit resulter de l'assemblage des qualités les plus éminentes un tout-ensemble défectueux et mal-assorti –

Gibbon's 'something wanting to the whole figure'? –

parce que ce n'est point la Religion et la raison, mais uniquement la vanité que les domine et qui les met en oeuvre. On y découvre quelle est le vuide et le danger des talens humaines; et de quelles extravagances peut se repaître un esprit dégouté du vrai et abandonné à sa propre inquiétude, L'homme est destiné, quoiqu'il fasse, à croire et à se soumettre. S'il secouë le joug de la foi, il faut qu'il sacrifie sa raison à des opinions arbitraires, insensées et plus incomprehensible que les Mistères qu'il rejette. Julien abandonnant la Religion Chrétienne pour se livrer aux illusions du Paganisme et de la Théurgie, est un exemple dans lequel tout incrédule doit plus ou moins se reconnoître.¹⁹

[We see in it a composition defective and ill sorted, though formed from an assemblage of the most eminent qualities, because it is not reason and religion, but vanity alone that rules and directs them; we discern the emptiness and danger

¹⁷ 1735, p. xvi. ¹⁸ 1746a, p. ix. ¹⁹ 1735, p. xv.

of human talents, and with what extravagancies a mind may be entertained that has lost a relish for truth, and is abandoned to its own inquietude. Man, let him use his utmost efforts to the contrary, is destined to believe and submit. If he shakes off the yoke of faith, he must sacrifice his reason to arbitrary and senseless opinions, more incomprehensible than the mysteries he rejects. Julian deserting the Christian religion to give himself up to the illusions of Paganism and Theurgy, is an example in which every unbeliever should more or less contemplate himself.^{20]}

La Bléterie, to some extent a Jansenist, held that reason could operate only as subordinate to faith, and personality as subordinate to grace. Gibbon would never accept this radically un-Enlightened account of unbelief, and would say that deism and scepticism were alternatives to faith no less than to occultism (not that the latter was unknown in his time); but we shall find that he is as insistent as La Bléterie that Julian's alternative religion, and the actions to which it led him, were the product of 'vanity' – a term, however, denoting less self-admiration than self-discovery. Both historians saw that the question was how Julian's mind had become disgusted with Christianity and 'abandoned to its own inquietude'. This was the matter of a *vie* rather than an *histoire*, but it was also part of the history of its time.

(II)

Gibbon's acquaintance with La Bléterie was of long standing.²¹ It can be traced back to his student years in Lausanne, when an entry in his Commonplace Book during 1755 reveals that he had been reading the *Vie de Julien*, and supplementing it from the relevant late antique historians.²² He there surveys all the anti-Christian measures taken by Julian, and observes that while he was the most dangerous of all the persecutors, and intended the absolute extinction of Christianity, he abstained from the creation of martyrs, disguised his steps under a pretence of tolerating all religions, and aimed instead at the gradual exclusion of Christians from public office and civil life; above all from the teaching of rhetoric and literature. In all this he followed La Bléterie point by point, and shows no sign of an independent judgement. The hypothesis that Gibbon's irreligion was already at work, and that he applauded Julian as Christianity's philosophic opponent, must rest on our reading, or our imagination, of

²⁰ 1746a, p. vii.

²¹ Bowersock, 1978, pp. 212–13. Gibbon mentions La Bléterie (*A*, p. 261) as one of those he met in Paris in 1763. He died in 1772.

²² YEG, p. 65. Gibbon in 1755 seems not to have known – since he would surely have mentioned – that La Bléterie published in that year a life of Tacitus and translations of his writings on the Germans and his life of Agricola (*Biographie Universelle*, 1854, p. 212).

these early years, not upon anything in this group of entries. It is in fact going to be difficult though not impossible to distinguish between La Blérierie's Christian critique of Julian and anything we find in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*; and we have not yet come upon the reasons for this difficulty.

Nine years later, in Lausanne again for the winter preceding his Italian journey, Gibbon studied the *Histoire de Jovien*, less for what it told him about that emperor than for the translations of Julian's writings appended to it. Though he continued citing the earlier translations by Spanheim, Gibbon admired La Blérierie's prose. He used his reading as the occasion for an enquiry also pursued by La Blérierie as to whether the imperial succession was hereditary or elective – not a very fruitful subject, as the *Decline and Fall* incessantly reveals – but of the book as a whole he wrote in his journal:

Quelle littérature, quelle goût, et quelle elegance! J'ajoute et quelle moderation! Julien étoit payen et l'Abbé ne hait que les Jesuites.²³

[What style, what taste, and what elegance! I will add 'and what moderation!' Julian was a pagan and the Abbé hates only the Jesuits.²⁴]

This may be true,²⁵ but it has little to do with La Blérierie's treatment of Julian, which is both moderate and condemnatory. The journal entry suggests a desire on Gibbon's part to enlist both La Blérierie and Julian in a Voltairean Moderate Enlightenment; but the *Decline and Fall* clearly displays his awareness that this could not be done. Julian was not an eighteenth-century deist, or a Ciceronian Academic, dutifully performing the rites of civic religion in public, while privately engaging in detached philosophical discourse *de natura deorum*. In all probability this is what Gibbon wished he had been, but the *vie de Julien* revealed him as a fanatic and enthusiast, while *histoire* revealed that his fanaticism was that of a late Platonist; and *vie* and *histoire* came together to explain that there was a philosophy prone to fanaticism and that Julian came to be drawn into it to the point of enthusiasm.

It was no news to Gibbon, and should be none to readers of these volumes, that those whom Mosheim had termed *recentiores Platonici* and we call neo-Platonists had given an unexpected turn to late Hellenist

²³ *Journal B*, p. 224; Bowersock, 1978, p. 192. ²⁴ Trans. JGAP.

²⁵ Neveu, 1994, p. 317, for La Blérierie's involvement in accusing the Jesuits of aiming at universal primacy. He had been admitted to the Oratory, but left rather than give up wearing a wig. In later life he was attracted to Quietism and published a defence of Madame Guyon. *Biographie Universelle*, 1854. Thanks to Orest Ranum for bringing these facts to my attention.

philosophy. Tillemont had condemned them, from Plotinus himself onward, as converting philosophy into a theurgy – as when Plotinus had said that he did not go to the gods but they came to him – which was not other than a vulgar and diabolic magic.²⁶ Mosheim had written that the school founded by Ammonius Sacca (of which he thought Julian had been a late member) had taught a syncretic pantheism that threatened to absorb Christianity itself by denying the uniqueness of the Incarnation.²⁷ Gibbon had signalled at the end of his chapter 13 the advent of a school of ‘new Platonists . . . who by a very singular revolution converted the study of philosophy into that of magic’,²⁸ and played a role (as Mosheim too had seen) in the history of the church if they had departed altogether from the history of philosophy. In chapter 16 he had shown these philosophers (as history obliged him to continue calling them) allying with the priests and officers of civic polytheism to persecute Christians in the reigns of Diocletian and Galerius;²⁹ while in chapter 21 he had hinted at the paradox that neo-Platonism and the responses to it might lie behind the Fourth Gospel, the rise of Christological dispute and the Arian controversy. He was well prepared, therefore, to see Julian as the imperial *pontifex* of an anti-church based on the alliance of polytheism and philosophy, a possibility to which he had already drawn attention.

There were two ways, however, in which the history Gibbon and La Bléterie had to recount differed from those narrated by Tillemont and Mosheim. In the first place, the philosophic paganism Julian hoped to establish rested as much on allegory as on metaphysics, and on *mythos* rather than on *logos*; in the second, its character was not to be understood without reference to Julian’s juvenile experience and the history of his personality, so that it must be written in terms of *vie* as well as *histoire*. La Bléterie’s English translator had made the latter point in a preface with which Gibbon may or may not have been acquainted.

The motives which led Julian to quit the Christian religion will be always matter of enquiry; for one apostate upon principle, raises our speculation more than thousands without principle, or against principle. Among other reasons which arise from a view of his life, I would suggest, the early prejudices he must have conceived against the cruelty of Constantius, the reigning vice, one may say, of that family. We imbibe in our youth the principles of our guardians in proportion only to our veneration for them. Perhaps our own queen Mary’s attachment to Popery might be accounted for from a like cause: a short reign, like Julian’s, and Christianity, as the Reformation, first established by a long reign, recovered the easier for a little

²⁶ *RFT*, pp. 75–6. ²⁷ *RFT*, pp. 201–4. ²⁸ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 399.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 560–1; *RFT*, pp. 298–301.

opposition to it. – But I will detain the reader no longer from the History, and his own reflections.³⁰

The translator proceeds direct to the French introduction, having made the important suggestion that Julian's revulsion from Christianity may have been the product of experience rather than conviction. La Bléterie and Gibbon concur, and the weight of ancient documentation, both autobiographical and biographical, directs us towards the *vie*. After the murder of their father (which may have occurred within Julian's sight or hearing³¹) the brothers Gallus and Julian are spared as possible heirs and placed in the care of none other than Eusebius of Nicomedia, succeeded by the infamous but equally Arian George of Cappadocia. It is unclear how far this choice was a consequence of the ecclesiastical politics of the 330s, but of Eusebius La Bléterie remarks:

Ce fameux Evêque de Cour, le chef et l'ame de l'intrigue Arienne, étoit peu propre à lui donner une idée juste de la Religion. Mais il pouvoit être plus capable qu'un autre d'entrer dans les vuës que Constance avoit peut-être dès lors sur le jeune Prince en le portant à embrasser l'état Ecclésiastique.³²

[This celebrated courtly prelate, the head and soul of the Arian party, was far from being a proper person to give him a just idea of religion: but he might be more capable than any other of entering into the views, which Constantius had even then perhaps upon this young prince, of inducing him to become an ecclesiastic.³³]

Gibbon concurs, emphasising that Julian's Christian education was systematic and effective; he

assures the Alexandrians that he had been a Christian (he must mean a sincere one) till the twentieth year of age. ... He escaped very narrowly from being a bishop, and perhaps a saint.³⁴

Had he remained sincere, Gibbon is suggesting, his temperament would have driven him to extremes; but there is the counter-suggestion that extremism was the product of his revolt against Christianity. La Bléterie avers that any mind that has abandoned Christian faith must fall into extravagances, and Julian's writings after apostasy may seem to support this; but there remains the question of how apostasy came about. La Bléterie offers explanation on two levels:

Je ne sais si l'on ménageoit assez un esprit capable de grands écarts, comme Julien. En l'astreignant à une vie surchargée d'exercices de piété, et affectant de multiplier

³⁰ La Bléterie, 1746a, p. iv, 'Advertisement'. Did the translator mean to suggest that Mary may have been rebelling against the cruelty of her father Henry VIII?

³¹ Athanassiadi, 1992, p. 14. ³² La Bléterie, 1735, p. 6. ³³ 1746a, p. 7.

³⁴ *DF*, ch. 23, n. 7; Womersley, 1994, I, p. 866n.

les engagements pour l'attacher à la Religion, on contribua peut-être à l'en detacher.³⁵

[I know not whether this was the proper method of conduct to a mind capable of such violent sallies, as was that of Julian: by confining him to a life overburdened with exercises of piety, and affecting to multiply duties in order to attach him to religion, they perhaps contributed in reality to disengage him from it.³⁶]

But also

Il laissoit entrevoir quelque opposition au Christianisme. Sa haine contre l'Empereur Constance, Chrétien très zélé, quoique persecuteur des Catholiques, en fut peut-être l'origine. Mais d'ailleurs la soumission qu'exige la foi pouvoit révolter un esprit curieux et enflé des sciences humaines. Il étoit sans doute frappé des funestes divisions qui déchiroient l'Eglise: sur tout de cette controverse scandaleuse, où il s'agissoit de savoir si J.C. est le Dieu souverain ou bien une creature: du relâchement des Chrétiens, des violences exercées contre les Orthodoxes par la faction Arienne, de la politique et de la foiblesse des principaux members du Clergé.³⁷

[He had always discovered some aversion to Christianity: his hatred for the emperor Constantius, a most zealous Christian, tho' a persecutor of the Catholics, was perhaps the origin of it; but that submission likewise of the understanding which faith exacts, might disgust an inquisitive mind, which was vain of its human learning. He was shocked, no doubt, at those fatal divisions which then rent the church, especially with that scandalous controversy whether Jesus Christ was the sovereign God, or only a creature; at the degeneracy of the Christians, the violences exercised by the Arian faction against the orthodox, and at the political intrigues and foibles of the principal members of the clergy.³⁸]

Gibbon concurs in his own terms; his Julian was shocked by theological controversy in another way.

The cause of his strange and fatal apostasy, may be derived from the early period of his life, when he was left an orphan in the hands of the murderers of his family. The names of Christ and of Constantius, the ideas of slavery and of religion, were soon associated in a youthful imagination, which was susceptible of the most lively impressions.

... his active curiosity might have been gratified by a theological system, which explains the mysterious essence of the Deity; and opens the boundless prospect of invisible and future worlds. But the independent spirit of Julian refused to yield the passive and unresisting obedience which was required, in the name of religion, by the haughty ministers of the church. Their speculative opinions were imposed as positive laws, and guarded by the terrors of eternal punishments; but while they prescribed the rigid formulary of the thoughts, the words, and the action of the young prince; whilst they silenced his objections, and severely checked the freedom of his enquiries, they secretly provoked his impatient genius to disclaim the

³⁵ 1735, p. 16. ³⁶ 1746a, pp. 11–12. ³⁷ 1735, pp. 27–8. ³⁸ 1746a, p. 7.

authority of his ecclesiastical guides. He was educated in the Lesser Asia, amidst the scandals of the Arian controversy. The fierce contests of the Eastern bishops, the incessant alteration of their creeds, and the profane motives which appeared to actuate their conduct, insensibly strengthened the prejudice of Julian, that they neither understood nor believed the religion for which they so fiercely contended. Instead of listening to the proofs of Christianity with that favourable attention which adds weight to the most respectable evidence, he heard with suspicion, and disputed with obstinacy and acuteness, the doctrines for which he already entertained an invisible aversion.³⁹

These are Gibbon's Enlightened imaginings, plausible enough but more the product of rhetoric than of research. His only footnote supporting them comes from Julian's later writings against the Christians,⁴⁰ and Julian's autobiographical texts contain little about a repressive regime of fanatical Arians – as they would have been – threatening eternal damnation. Rather, they complain bitterly of the six years of social and intellectual isolation spent by Gallus and Julian at Marcellum near modern Kaiseri, bereft of conversation and company and with nothing to read but George of Cappadocia's collection of mainly pagan authors. La Bléterie fastens on the latter point; the passage last quoted continues:

En lisant nuit et jour les Auteurs Païens, il s'étoit familiarisé avec leur manière de penser. L'estime outré qu'il faisoit des grands hommes de l'Antiquité le portoit insensiblement à souhaiter qu'ils eussent toujours raison. C'est ainsi qu'au commencement du seizième siècle quelques-uns des savans qui contribuèrent au rétablissement des lettres étoient, dit-on, Païens dans le coeur, plus encore par pédanterie que par libertinage: ensorte qu'il n'eût pas tenu à eux de ramener le culte des Dieux d'Homère et de Virgile.⁴¹

[By continually reading the heathen writings, he had familiarised himself to their manner of thinking; the immoderate esteem which he had for the great men of antiquity, insensibly inclined him to wish they might always be in the right. Thus in the beginning of the sixteenth century, some of the learned, who contributed to the re-establishment of literature, are said to be Pagans in their hearts, more out of pedantry than libertinism; so that with their good-will, they would have restored the gods of Homer and Virgil.⁴²]

There is no exact equivalent to this in the corresponding pages of Gibbon's chapter 23. La Bléterie has in mind such Renaissance neo-Platonists as Pico della Mirandola and Gemistus Plethon, some of whom went closer than he suggests to a re-absorption of Christianity into Platonism; but it is significant that he is ascribing a pagan revival to the reading of poets rather than philosophers. The Macellum years end

³⁹ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 865–7. ⁴⁰ p. 867, n. 10. ⁴¹ La Bléterie, 1735, pp. 27–8.

⁴² 1746a, pp. 19–20; a rather odd translation of the last sentence.

when Gallus is singled out to be trained as Caesar, and Julian is free to pursue unsupervised study at Ephesus. Here he encounters neo-Platonism in the form of Iamblichan theurgy, and undergoes the central spiritual and intellectual experience of his life: one with which a sceptical rejection of Christian theology does not really have much to do. It is more suggestive to return, with both La Blérierie and Gibbon, to the hypothesis that he saw Christianity as the ideology of the regime which had murdered his father, deprived him of identity, and exiled him to Macellum. It is as if Hamlet had met Faustus at Wittenberg. At Ephesus, this hyper-intelligent and deeply traumatised adolescent met with a philosophy which was also a cosmogony. Pagan and not fully monotheist, it presented a universe pervaded at all points by spiritual intelligence which repeatedly embodied itself in gods, genii and daimones, and which the philosophic intellect might penetrate, share and command, to the point where it could call the gods to itself and even command their actions. Identifying them with the gods of Greek and Roman poetical theology, Julian became something which Gibbon had so far held could not exist: a polytheist and a fanatic, for which the only possible word was 'enthusiast'.

It is characteristic of Julian that at the moment of embracing a philosophy which offered him the role of philosopher-king and perhaps something more, he went in search of a guru. The sources all relate how at Ephesus he pestered the aged Aedesius till the latter relegated him to his disciples, and they in turn sent him to the theurge and thaumaturge Maximus, who became his close friend and spiritual counsellor to the last moment of his life. Gibbon's contempt for these proceedings knows no bounds; in his view Julian was being worked by a camarilla of con-men, and it is not possible to regard theurgists as anything other than charlatans.⁴³ Tillemont had entertained the possibility that they (Plotinus included) were practising real black arts with actual demons, but La Blérierie is closer to saying that they were charlatans who may have deceived even themselves. There is a distinction to be made regarding the explanation of the intellectual and cultural origins of Iamblichan theurgy, of some importance to the understanding of what went on during Julian's reign and how historians related it. The thesis that the universe was pervaded by spirit which embodied itself in gods can be given a metaphysical explanation, as a consequence of the pre-Christian inability to conceive God as creator *ex nihilo*; Beausobre had examined many ways in which uncreated spirit and matter were imagined as two or as one.⁴⁴ Here it would have been possible to draw a sharp line between an ancient

⁴³ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 871–2, and n. 23. ⁴⁴ *RFT*, ch. 5.

philosophy pursuing a vain search for the essence of things, and a modern confining itself to the observation of their behaviour. Had Gibbon, who was certainly aware of this distinction, applied it to the history of Julian and the neo-Platonists, we should be in a position to say that he was applying an Enlightened history of philosophy; and that is certainly to be found in the great Johann Jakob Brucker's *Historia Critica Philosophiae*,⁴⁵ of which Gibbon remarks at this point:

Eunapius has made these sophists the subject of a partial and fanatical history; and the learned Brucker . . . has employed much labour to illustrate their obscure lives and incomprehensible doctrines.⁴⁶

It is important, however, to realise that La Blérierie, Gibbon, and in many ways Julian himself, give a different account of philosophical paganism, based on allegory rather than metaphysics and on the reading of poetry rather than philosophy. To understand this is to understand both Julian's mind and the cultural politics of his reign, and it is not irrelevant to the histories of both Renaissance humanism and Enlightenment. La Blérierie sets it out at length.

Mais l'Idolatrie n'avoit point de meilleur appui que les gens de lettres. Tous ceux qui Julien estimoit, grammariens, poètes, sophistes, philosophes, si l'on en excepte un petit nombre, tenoient pour les vieilles superstitions.⁴⁷

[But idolatry had no firmer support than in the men of learning: all who had Julian's esteem, grammarians, poets, philosophers, if we except a small number, held for the ancient superstitions.⁴⁸]

We have to do not only with a school of philosophers, but with an entire literary culture: one, however, if not yet pervaded by Christianity, already needing to defend itself against philosophers and Christians alike.

Ils avouoient que le Mithologie étoit insoûtenable prise à la lettre, mais en même-tems elle contenoit, selon eux, sous l'emblème des fictions, les profondeurs de la Phisique, de la Morale et de la Théologie. L'absurdité de la lettre monstroît assez qu'il falloit aller plus avant, et percer les envelopes grossières pour découvrir un sens plus sublime. Un air de mystère convenoit à la Verité. On l'avoit ainsi voilée pour la rendre plus respectable à ceux qui la recherchoient, et pour la dérober à ceux qui ne s'en rendoient pas dignes par leurs recherches.⁴⁹

[They confessed that the mythology taken literally was not to be defended; but at the same time it contained, according to them, under the emblem of fictions, all the depths of physics, morality, and theology. The absurdity of the letter showed plainly enough that you ought to go farther, and penetrate through the veil to

⁴⁵ Brucker, 1742–4; *RFT*, p. 199. ⁴⁶ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 869, n. 16.

⁴⁷ La Blérierie, 1735, p. 29. ⁴⁸ 1746a, p. 21. ⁴⁹ 1735, p. 30.

discover a sense more sublime. An air of mystery was suitable to truth. She was thus veiled to render her the more venerable to those who sought after her, and to conceal her from those who did not render themselves worthy of her by their researches.^{50]}

Le Platonisme de ce tems-là n'étoit pas la pure doctrine de Platon. On y avoit joint quelques dogmes des autres philosophes, et sur tout la cabale des Orientaux. Dans cette secte on enseignoit à tout venant une Philosophie ordinaire; mais on gardoit un silence profond sur la partie mystérieuse du système. . . . On ne s'ouvroit qu'à des gens d'une fidélité éprouvée, ou dont on n'étoit assuré d'ailleurs. On apprenoit à ceux-ci une Philosophie occulte sur les différentes espèces de Divination, sur la nature et subordination des Dieux et des Génies, touchant leur culte secret et les cérémonies nécessaires pour lier commerce avec eux. Car les Platoniciens promettoient de rendre l'homme parfait et heureux, en lui procurant une union intime avec la Divinité: et comme selon Platon l'espace immense qui nous sépare de Dieu est rempli d'Êtres subordonnés les uns aux autres, ils prétendoient, à l'aide d'une longue chaîne de Héros, de Génies et de Dieux, faire arriver l'ame, par degrés et de proche en proche, jusqu'à la vûë la plus immédiate du Dieu souverain, par y devenir Dieu elle-même en se plongeant et se perdant dans l'abîme de l'Être, du Vrai et du Bien. Leur science s'appelloit Théurgie.⁵¹

[The Platonism of that time was not the pure doctrine of Plato. They had joined with it several tenets of other philosophers, and particularly the cabal of the orientals. In this sect they taught one common philosophy to all who came; but kept a profound silence as to the mysterious part of the system. . . . They never disclosed themselves but to people of tried fidelity or whom they were sure of other ways. These they taught an occult philosophy concerning the different kinds of divination, the nature and subordination of the gods and genii, their secret manner of worshipping them, and the ceremonies necessary to enter into a correspondence with them. For the Platonists promised to render man perfect and happy, by procuring him an intimate union with the divinity: And as, according to Plato, the immense space which separates us from the deity, is filled with beings subordinate to each other, they pretended, by the help of a long chain of heroes, genii and gods, to carry the soul to the immediate vision of the sovereign God, there to become itself a deity, by being absorbed and lost in the abyss of truth and goodness. Their science was called Theurgy.^{52]}

An account by now familiar enough of religion before the discovery of creation *ex nihilo*. La Bléterie goes on to observe that since it disdained the 'seul et unique Médiateur' who was Jesus Christ, it was condemned to become a traffic with the powers of darkness;⁵³ but the reader of Julian will be equally aware of the incredulous outrage with which its practitioners must have greeted the news that commerce with this vast and multifaceted universe, open at so many doors of perception, could be had only through the person of an obscure Jew, publicly executed three centuries before in

⁵⁰ 1746a, pp. 21–2. ⁵¹ 1735, pp. 39–41. ⁵² 1746a, pp. 27–9. ⁵³ 1735, p. 41.

Palestine. Christians must reject a nearly infinite chain of mediators, each of them intelligible as the bearer of an idea and converted by allegory from a primitive god or hero into a genius or a daimon. Julian perceived Iamblichan neo-Platonism as a means of associating every god of civil polytheism with the idea of a universal empire in contact with the abyss of universal deity.

It is important to realise, however, that this synthesis of philosophical paganism was achieved by allegory even more than by metaphysics, in a culture where rhetoric and literary study outweighed even philosophy in the intellectual construction of empire; a training in rhetoric was necessary to entry into the imperial bureaucracy. The professors of rhetoric had long been engaged in the idealisation of epic, so that Homer became the teacher of all practical wisdom and all moral instruction; Julian remembered with affection his early tutor Mardonius, who taught him why it was better to study chariot-racing in the ideal form presented in the poems than to engage in the sweat and dust of the thing oneself.⁵⁴ At this level the transition from actual to ideal is fairly simple; it was a different matter, however, to convert the doings of Homeric heroes and Olympian gods into the ideal actions and contemplations of a Platonic universe. Here allegory came into play, and enormous intellectual energy was expended on re-narrating primeval myths as the dramatisations of philosophy. Julian himself – to proceed to the intellectual climax of his development – wrote ‘hymns’, as they are called, to Helios, Cybele and Atthis, in which the sun-god becomes the Platonic Logos and Atthis’s self-castration becomes the emblem of his progress from the changing to the unchanging.⁵⁵ At one end of the chain, cultic, politic, urban and of course vulgar religion retained its physical and often brutal immediacy – Julian as emperor bloodied his hands in the guts of sacrificial victims⁵⁶ – while allegory ascended the chain towards the contemplation of the ideal as the real. This was Julian’s vision of philosophic paganism as the religion of empire. It is necessary to compare the ways in which the Christian La Bléterie and the sceptic Gibbon rejected it.

For La Bléterie the enterprise of allegory, which sought ‘spiritualiser les opinions dominantes’ by furthering the attempt to proceed from thing to idea, was doomed from the outset because

⁵⁴ Wright, 1913/2002, II, pp. 458–62 *et seq*; *DF*, I, ch. 23, n. 4; Athanassiadi, 1992, pp. 16ff.

⁵⁵ Wright, 1913/2002, I, pp. 353–435 (Helios), 443–503 (Cybele and Atthis).

⁵⁶ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 878.

Des réflexions venues après coup ne pouvoient refondre le Paganisme, qui est essentiellement mauvais, puisqu'il consiste à rendre la creature un homage qui ne lui est pas dû, et à la substituer au Créateur, à le confondre avec elle.⁵⁷

[reflections made afterwards could not now mould Paganism, which is essentially bad, since it consists in rendering to the creature an homage which is not due to it, substituting that in the place of the creator, and confounding them together.⁵⁸]

Nor had philosophy any Pentateuch, or any Moses able to proclaim a law or a revelation in the place of false worship; it was not more than

un corps de chimères formé à l'avanture des délires de l'esprit humain, et dont l'origine n'avoit pas été la même dans tous les lieux. En général l'amour des objets sensibles avoit fourni le fonds.⁵⁹

[a body of chimeras formed by accident out of the wandering deliria of the human mind, and whose origin was different in different places. In general, the love of sensible objects was the foundation of it.⁶⁰]

The progress from things to ideas, from the worship of created objects to that of the inventions of the human mind, was not at all unlike Hume's progress from superstition to enthusiasm; but La Bléterie professed a religion founded on revelation and reason, which defied reduction to Humean terms. The gap separating him from Hume is profound, but at the same time narrow, and in consequence Gibbon's treatment of Julian is so far coincident with his that the two seem, misleadingly, hardly to differ. La Bléterie held that only the acceptance of revelation could preserve human reason, since without it the mind must engage in speculations about God it was not competent to form, because God's nature was beyond its comprehension. Chimeras must therefore take shape in it, and a philosophy that taught them to be truths must arrive at what Hume meant by enthusiasm: the mind's worship of its own creations, and consequently of itself. Gibbon, often following Le Clerc, concurs with all this, but seems to hold, since he never states, that the mind does well to hold back from faith in revelation, if only because it will never refrain from defining the content of faith, thus generating a disputatious but intolerant theology. To this an orthodox Christian like La Bléterie will reply that Incarnation is the statement of ultimate mystery, and that any attempt to define it further and so delimit it, will open the door to atheism on the one hand, and fanaticism and enthusiasm on the other. The problem of Julian is obviously different since he denies Christ's divinity altogether.

⁵⁷ La Bléterie, 1735, p. 35n. ⁵⁸ 1746a, p. 24.

⁵⁹ 1735, p. 37n. (footnote *b* has commenced on p. 34).

⁶⁰ 1746a; the full footnote occupies pp. 24–7.

Julian's was never a sceptical intelligence. Once, however, and for whatever reasons, his revulsion against Christianity had occurred, other intellectual and cultural forces took command. The genius of poets (Homer of course above all) made the gods of antiquity real to the imagination; the Platonist belief in a chain of gods and daimones connecting humanity with the ultimate godhead presented them as real to the philosophic intellect; and the schools of rhetoric and literature perfected the system.

The philosophers of the Platonist school, Plotinus, Porphyry, and the divine Iamblichus, were admired as the most skilful masters of this allegorical science, which laboured to soften and harmonise the deformed features of Paganism. Julian himself, who was directed in the mysterious pursuit by Aedesius, the venerable successor of Iamblichus, aspired to the possession of a treasure which he esteemed, if we may credit his solemn asseverations, far above the empire of the world. It was indeed a treasure which derived its value only from opinion . . . This freedom of interpretation, which might gratify the pride of the Platonists, exposed the vanity of their art. Without a tedious detail the modern reader could not form a just idea of the strange allusions, the forced etymologies, the solemn trifling, and the impenetrable obscurity of these sages, who professed to reveal the system of the universe⁶¹

and of whom Gibbon does not excuse Julian himself from having been one. The essential point is that this union of poetry and philosophy, allegory and metaphysics, permitted superstition to co-exist with enthusiasm and even to lead to it. Julian's imagination could entertain as reality all the myths of all the gods – notably those who underwrote the legendary histories of the cities he desired to restore to autonomy – while permitting allegory and philosophy to present them as daimonic agents in the intellectual universe of which he was himself one of the governors, since

the magic or theory of the modern Platonists . . . arrogantly pretended to control the order of nature, to explore the secrets of futurity, to command the service of the inferior daemons, to enjoy the view and conversation of the superior gods, and, by disengaging the soul from her material bonds, to re-unite that immortal particle with the Infinite and Divine Spirit.⁶²

An emperor as philosopher-king could thus function at all levels of a chain of being running from the heroes of original epic, through the sociable gods of civil polytheism, to the ultimate union with *τὸ ἐν*; but it seemed a heavy price to Gibbon that Julian's intellect was obliged to practise superstition and enthusiasm together. He nowhere gives us an Enlightened critique of ancient philosophy and religion; but the education

⁶¹ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 869. ⁶² p. 871.

of Julian before he goes to Gaul culminates when Maximus the theurgist induces him to undergo initiation into the mysteries at Ephesus. Gibbon had earlier debated the nature of the mysteries with Warburton, arguing that their purpose was not to reveal personal immortality but to initiate the soul into the secrets of a universe probably atomistic but intelligible only by occult means.⁶³ His Julian begins this progress at Ephesus, continues it later at Eleusis during his studies at Athens, and seems also to have undergone the Mithraic initiation of the *taurobolium*.⁶⁴ In them all, symbolic ordeals led to a mystical illumination.

In the caverns of Ephesus and Eleusis the mind of Julian was penetrated with sincere, deep, and unalterable enthusiasm –

the worship of gods who had become ideas, and ideas which had become gods –

though he might sometimes exhibit the vicissitudes of pious fraud and hypocrisy which may be observed, or at least suspected, in the characters of the most conscientious fanatics.⁶⁵

Enthusiasm is never quite free from deception, commonly deception of the self. Because the origins of Julian's cosmology were sociable – and therefore both superstitious and enthusiastic – they did not sever his enthusiasm from the rule of civil society and empire.

Julian could break from the dream of superstition to arm himself for battle; and after vanquishing in the field the enemies of Rome, he calmly retired into his tent, to dictate the wise and salutary laws of an empire, or to indulge his genius in the elegant pursuits of literature and philosophy.⁶⁶

He did not break from enthusiasm, and his writings on literature and philosophy were never the elegant amusements Gibbon is trying to suggest here. They were in fact expressions of his fanaticism. However, as sources for the union of polytheism and philosophy Julian tried to institute as a state religion displacing Christianity, they anchored his enterprise in the Greco-Roman cultural inheritance, and this was to be important in the brief history of his apostasy.

⁶³ 'Critical Observations on the Design of the Sixth Book of the Aeneid': *EE*, pp. 131–62; *A*, p. 280–3; *RFT*, p. 235.

⁶⁴ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 872 (Ephesus and Eleusis); 865, n. 5 (for the *taurobolium*). For a strong statement of Julian's Mithraism, Athanassiadi, 1992, ch. II.

⁶⁵ p. 872. ⁶⁶ p. 873.

10 Julian as persecutor: from toleration to the failure of repression

(I)

Gibbon's first encounter with La Blérierie, as a self-guided student in 1755, had persuaded him that Julian

avait pour grand but de detruire la religion Chretienne et certainement il s'y prenait bien. C'était le persecuteur le plus doux le plus systematique et en meme tems le plus dangereux de tous. Il avait senti que les Grandes Persecutions n'avait fait qu'augmenter le nombre de Chretiens, il resolut de se conduire autrement pour les abattre.¹

[had as his chief aim the destruction of the Christian religion, and certainly he went the right way about it. He was the mildest of persecutors, the most systematic, and at the same time the most dangerous of all. He had seen that the ten great persecutions had merely increased the number of Christians, and he resolved to act otherwise in order to destroy them.]²

Gibbon was accurately summarising the account given by La Blérierie. Instead of spreading the blood of martyrs which was the seed of the church, Julian resolved to proceed in two ways: by excluding them from civil office and by denying them the right to teach pagan literature.³ It is evident that things had changed since the days of Diocletian and Galerius, and that Gibbon told a very different story in chapter 16 of the *Decline and Fall*, twenty years after this entry in his Commonplace Book. Diocletian had persecuted the Christians for rejecting civil authority and pagan literature, as they did on the grounds that both involved acknowledgement of the demons who were the pagan gods; Julian hoped to extinguish them by excluding them from civil office, including that of teaching a publicly acknowledged rhetoric. The Christians, it is evident, must have greatly changed, and Julian was trying to undo their integration into civil society at the level to which it had risen under Constantine and Constantius. Gibbon understood why Decius and Diocletian perceived

¹ Bowersock, 1977, p. 212. The lack of accentuation is Gibbon's. ² Trans. JGAP.

³ Bowersock 1977, p. 212.

the church as a republic within the state, founded on principles other than those which maintained it;⁴ does he, writing in 1777–9, see Julian as facing the same dangers from the ‘republic of bishops’ with whom Constantine had formed an alliance and whose inner conflicts Constantius had tried to control?

About this the young Gibbon had written, again concurring with La Bléterie:

Il rappela tous les Eveques soit Ariens soit Orthodoxes (qui avaient été chassés de leur sieges), et sous un masque de moderation tachait d’entretenir la division entre eux.⁵

[He recalled from exile all the bishops, whether Arian or Orthodox, who had been expelled from their sees, and under the mask of moderation sought to perpetuate the division among them.⁶]

This account, which clearly reveals the ambiguities of toleration, is continued in chapter 23 of Gibbon’s second volume, but in terms which at first sight seem to present the new emperor as the figure Enlightenment would like him to have been.

Julian surprised the world by an edict which was not unworthy of a statesman or a philosopher. He extended to all the inhabitants of the Roman world⁷ the benefits of a free and equal toleration; and the only hardship which he inflicted on the Christians was to deprive them of the power of tormenting their fellow-subjects, whom they stigmatised with the odious titles of idolaters and heretics. The Pagans received a gracious permission, or rather an express order, to open ALL their temples –

there is an emphasis here which means something.

At the same time, the bishops and clergy who had been banished by the Arian monarch were recalled from exile, and restored to their respective churches; the Donatists, the Novatians, the Macedonians, the Eunomians, and those who, with a more prosperous fortune, adhered to the doctrine of the council of Nice. . . . The impartial Ammianus has ascribed this affected clemency to the desire of fomenting the intestine divisions of the church; and the insidious design of undermining the foundations of Christianity was inseparably connected with the zeal which Julian professed to restore the ancient religion of the empire.⁸

To tolerate all religions may be to undermine some. This cannot apply to cultic polytheism, which has no doctrines claiming to be true or false; whether theurgic neo-Platonism can demand toleration or show itself

⁴ *RFT*, pp. 74, 82–3, 297–302. ⁵ Bowersock, 1977, p. 213. ⁶ Trans. JGAP.

⁷ Cf. Gibbon’s language regarding Constantine’s edict of Milan (Womersley, 1994, I, p. 766; above, p. 82): ‘confirmed to each individual of the Roman world’.

⁸ pp. 876–7.

intolerant may be another matter. Gibbon is enlarging on La Bléterie as he did in 1755; but we may suppose him acquainted with the passage in Tillemont where Julian's subversive toleration is presented as God's instrument for breaking down that solid front of Arianism, supported by Constantius, which had imposed the formulae of the Council of Rimini and left the world surprised to find itself Arian.⁹ One might expect to find Julian confronted by a party of powerful bishops which it would take more than a couple of edicts to dissolve, but nothing is said of this; what became of Ursacius and Valens Gibbon does not think necessary to tell us.¹⁰ There are only a few hints of friendly contact between Julian and Aetius 'the Atheist', whose radical scepticism of Christian theology he might have found congenial.¹¹ But Gibbon's Julian is on the road towards enthusiasm, not scepticism. Meanwhile, he has before him a serious problem of government. It is one thing to recall bishops from exile, another to restore them to their sees; one thing to command pagans to reopen their temples, another to recover them (all of them) from Christian hands or to restore them when they have been demolished. Governing the late antique city could be done only by armed force, and toleration could not be imposed by edict alone.

The story of Julian's planned disestablishment, and (whenever it appeared) of his positive hatred, of Christianity, had still to be told in terms of *vie* rather than *histoire*. He identified the new religion with the regime of which he was by birth part, but which had murdered his father, dragged him into semi-exile, and forced him to perform the role of a Christian even after he had ceased to be (if he ever was) a believer.¹² Gibbon says:

as every act of dissimulation must be painful to an ingenious spirit, the profession of Christianity increased the aversion of Julian for a religion which oppressed the freedom of his mind, and compelled him to hold a conduct repugnant to the noblest attributes of human nature – sincerity and courage.¹³

We are still in a history of self-perception; it would be fair to ask, however, whether 'sincerity and courage' are ancient heroic or modern

⁹ Above, p. 118.

¹⁰ Tillemont says (*Mémoires*, VI, p. 594; VIII, pp. 457, 541; VIII, pp. 240, 396, 400) that they retained their dioceses, but that their heresies were condemned by a council at Paris in 360, after which (if still living) they became non-persons and are never mentioned again.

¹¹ Wright, 1913/2002, III, pp. xxx–xxxi, 35–7, 288–91. Gallus while Caesar was troubled by reports of his brother's unorthodoxy, and requested Aetius (of all people) to reassure him on the subject. Philostorgius, an Arian and according to some an anomoian like Aetius, is the source for this. La Bléterie, 1746a, p. 37. Bowersock, 1978, pp. 63–4.

¹² Historians continue to debate when he ceased to be a Christian, and when he declared himself a pagan.

¹³ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 874–5.

moral virtues. The revulsion against Christianity here depicted prepares the way for his passionate embrace of Platonism as an alternative vision of universe and self. But once he becomes emperor, his beliefs become a public matter and must be publicly defined. Gibbon continues:

The inclination of Julian might prefer the gods of Homer and of the Scipios¹⁴ to the new faith which his uncle had established in the Roman empire, and in which he himself had been sanctified by the sacrament of baptism. But, as a philosopher – should not Gibbon have added ‘as an emperor’?

it was incumbent on him to justify his dissent from Christianity, which was supported by the number of its converts, by the chain of prophecy, the splendour of miracles, and the weight of evidence.¹⁵

We need not be too hasty to read these words as ironic or insincere. True or false, these were the arguments Julian had to meet, and Gibbon proceeds to consider his writings *contra Galilaeos*, though these were probably among the last he composed. They were of course neo-Platonic –

in the impious list of the enemies of Christianity the celebrated name of Porphyry was effaced by the superior merit or reputation of Julian¹⁶ –

as in large measure were the Christian replies to them. La Bléterie observes that these would not win the applause of a modern philosopher and wishes that one such would undertake the refutation of Julian. Such a ‘*theologien-philosophe*’ would be ‘a strange centaur’, says Gibbon,¹⁷ meaning that it would be hard to find a ‘modern’ philosopher whose arguments admitted Christianity as more than an act of faith. But Gibbon’s philosophy is directed more against Julian than against any of his opponents:

in the assiduous prosecution of these theological studies the emperor of the Romans imbibed the illiberal prejudices and passions of a polemic divine. He contracted an irrevocable obligation to maintain and propagate his religious opinions; and whilst he secretly applauded the strength and dexterity with which he wielded the weapons of controversy, he was tempted to distrust the sincerity, or to despise the understandings, of his antagonists, who could obstinately resist the force of reason and eloquence.¹⁸

This does not much differ from what Gibbon had earlier written of Constantine at the moment of his issuing the similarly tolerant edict of Milan.¹⁹ An emperor who engages in theology is always tempted to

¹⁴ ‘The Scipios’ turn the reader’s attention towards Rome and Cicero. Given Julian’s indifference to Latinity, are they Gibbon’s insertion?

¹⁵ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 875. ¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, n. 31. The Lockean Warburton had perhaps offered to play the role. ¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 766; above, p. 83.

become a persecutor, whether because power applauds itself and intoxicates its holder, or because theology is inherently committed to the conflation of reason with faith. Julian initially knew this danger, and the passage just quoted immediately precedes those noted earlier, in which the edict issued at the time of his accession is presented as an edict of toleration, and the ambivalences of toleration are explored. Julian's real aim was a change of establishment.

Gibbon proceeds to describe at length²⁰ the massive scale on which Julian re-established the cults: the holocausts of sacrificial victims, in rites in which Julian participated without presiding. This was the religion of the cities, whom he hoped to restore to their former sociability (to borrow the term from Warburton²¹); if not the heroic virtue of antiquity, the prosperity and politeness of the Antonine age. It was, however, the foundation of religion in superstition, which Julian fully and consciously shared, but which must be crowned by a philosophy capable of ending in enthusiasm, as in Julian's case Gibbon perceived it did.

But the genius and power of Julian were unequal to the enterprise of restoring a religion which was destitute of theological principles, of moral precepts, and of ecclesiastical discipline; which rapidly hastened to decay and dissolution, and was not susceptible of any solid or consistent reformation.²²

This was no more than La Bléterie had said, and must be said by any Christian accusing pagan ritual and Olympic legend of gross immorality; it might equally be said by any more or less Enlightened Christian or deist aiming to reduce religion to the practice of the social virtues. Gibbon is as likely to be adopting the Christian case against paganism as he is to be subverting it. It is Julian, however, who is near to being captivated at this point by the religion he is trying to discipline. Gibbon proceeds to relate how Julian as 'supreme pontiff . . . named for his vicars, in the several provinces, the priests and philosophers whom he esteemed the best qualified', and issued 'pastoral letters, if we may use that name', prescribing the duties of an 'inferior clergy'.²³

The clerical language is of course no accident. Gibbon's Julian is imagining an anti-church, though he could be called an anti-pope only proleptically, since there is no Christian supreme pontiff yet. His clergy, however, have to be recruited, and since the gods of whom they are to be priests are hierarchised by Iamblichan daimonology, there must be a superior clergy drawn from the philosophers and theurgists of this branch of neo-Platonic philosophy. These include not a few questionable

²⁰ pp. 877–8. ²¹ *RFT*, pp. 231–3. ²² Womersley, 1994, I, p. 879. ²³ *Ibid.*

characters, of whom Julian's guru Maximus is unfortunately the chief, and Gibbon concludes with a regretful footnote:

It is strange that we should not be able to contradict the title of one of Tillemont's chapters . . . 'La Cour de Julien est pleine de philosophes et de gens perdus'.²⁴

There is more than one species of those 'strange centaurs', *theologien-philosophes*'.

Once Julian envisages – he has not time to establish – an imperial anti-church on these foundations, the theurgic religion ceases to be simply his means of reasserting himself and becomes his instrument of empire; we move from *vie* to *histoire*. Gibbon sees that the philosophical and mystical treatises, issued in such numbers by Julian from the *Letter to Themistius* to the *Misopogon*, are not only personal statements or contributions to the literature of a *république des philosophes*; they are pastoral letters – a modern scholar has called them 'encyclicals'²⁵ – published by the supreme pontiff of an imperial church. We would like to know more, but perhaps it was not in Gibbon's historiographic vocabulary to ask, about the physical and social means of their publication and distribution. It is clear to Gibbon, however, that Julian is establishing an orthodoxy, and therefore excluding and perhaps proscribing a series of heresies. There are denunciations of Cynics – at least of the wrong sort of Cynics – and the philosophic priesthood are warned, as Gibbon had noticed happening at an earlier point,²⁶ against the impious atheism of Sceptics and Epicureans;²⁷ more is afoot than a Warburtonian religion of sociability and pantheism. Of far greater moment, however, to La Bléterie, Gibbon, and contemporary students of Julian's reign, this is the point at which his antipathy to Christianity ceases to be merely personal and becomes public as well. Christianity is not only a religion but a church; Julian is aiming to undo the establishment of that church by Constantine. It is one consequence that he now becomes potentially a persecutor; another that Christianity has by now obtained footholds in empire, society and culture, from which he will now seek to expel it. This is a development in the history of Christianity as perceived by Gibbon.

(II)

Chapter 23 focuses on two measures by which Julian aimed at the discrediting of Christianity: the plan to rebuild the Temple at Jerusalem, and the edict prohibiting the teaching of pagan literature by Christians.

²⁴ p. 882, n. 48. ²⁵ Bowersock, 1978, p. 81. ²⁶ *RFT*, p. 299.

²⁷ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 880, and n. 38.

Gibbon deals with them in that order, more thematic than chronological, and on the former has the aid of two near-contemporaries: La Blérierie (d. 1772) and William Warburton (d. 1778): the latter of whom had published a work²⁸ subsidiary to the *Divine Legation of Moses*, mainly concerned to vindicate the miraculous character of the subterranean fires which, according to the pagan Ammianus,²⁹ had prevented the laying of new foundations on the Temple Mount. Gibbon of course deals with this question in his usual manner; it is better to believe the critically improbable than the physically impossible, and perhaps better still to fall back on the certainty of doubt and declare that we do not know what caused these explosions or even whether they occurred. Methodological scepticism leaves the way open to the formation of testable hypotheses.³⁰ The issue of miracle, however, tells us nothing about Julian's motives or the historical situation in which he was acting; and here the historians agree that he meant to falsify Jesus's prophecy that no stone of the Temple would be left standing on another, as had been visibly the case since the year 70. By restoring Jewish worship under Roman imperial auspices, he would expel Christianity from the cosmology he meant to make the religion of empire, and perhaps adopt Judaism into it.

To Christians, of course, the fall of the Temple meant the ejection of the Jews from the sacred history which had so far been theirs but which they had failed to comprehend. La Blérierie sets this out with Christian eloquence:

Il ne sera pas inutile de développer en peu de mots la preuve que nous fournit la dispersion des Juifs: preuve singulière, à laquelle la suite des siècles ne fait qu'ajouter un nouveau degré de force et d'éclat.

Le peuple Juif autrefois si favorisé du Ciel, maintenant bannis de son propre pais, dispersé par tout, et par tout l'objet du mépris et de la haine, inutilement zélé pour un culte dont la pratique lui est devenuë impossible, pousse vers le Dieu de ses peres des cris que ce Dieu n'écoute plus. Cette nation toujours écrasée, et jamais anéantie, ne pouvant réunir ses propres débris, ni attirer à soi les autres peuples, ni se confondre avec eux, porte le double caractère d'une reprobation et d'une protection visible ... Elle doit seulement finir, lorsque sortant de leur profonde léthargie, ils s'adresseront à celui qui leurs peres ont crucifié, et deviendront ses plus fidèles adorateurs ... La Religion Chrétienne peut seule rendre raison de l'état des Juifs : et leur état rend un temoignage toujours subsistant à la Religion Chrétienne.³¹

[it may not be amiss to represent in a few words the proof which the dispersion of the Jews furnishes us; an uncommon proof, to which length of time adds only new

²⁸ Warburton, 1750. ²⁹ Ammianus, 23, 1, 1; Rolfe, 1939/1986, II, pp. 310–11.

³⁰ I borrow 'the certainty of doubt' from the late Peter Munz; Fairburn and Oliver, 1996.

³¹ La Blérierie, 1735, pp. 372–4.

degrees of force and clearness. The Jewish people who were heretofore such favourites of heaven, now banished from their country,³² every where dispers'd, and every where the object of hatred and contempt, fruitlessly zealous for a worship, the practice of which is become impossible, pour forth to the God of their fathers, lamentations which that God rejects. This nation, always crush'd, yet never destroyed, unable to reunite its own remains, to draw other nations to it, or to mix itself with them, bears the double character of a visible reprobation and protection . . . It is not to cease till, rousing from their profound lethargy, they shall address themselves to him whom their fathers crucified, and became the most faithful of his adorers . . . The Christian religion alone can give a reason for the present condition of the Jews: and their condition gives a testimony perpetually subsisting to the Christian religion.³³]

Julian understood this, La Blérierie continues, but his plan

n'alloit à rien moins qu'à détruire tout à la fois et le Christianisme et la révélation Judaïque. Si Julien eût réussi, Jesus-Christ n'étoit plus l'objet des anciennes Ecritures, lesquelles envisagées sous tout autre point de vuë, ne pouvoient paroître, si ce n'étoit à un Juif, qu'un amas de vaines cérémonies, de faussetés, de contradictions, qu'un ouvrage de la politique, du fanatisme et de la témérité, L'édifice du Christianisme dénué du fondement de l'ancienne révélation, demeurait en l'air, et s'écrouloit de lui-même. On dit encore que son dessein étoit, lorsqu'il auroit défait les Chrétiens par les Juifs, d'attaquer ceux-ci à leur tour, et de les contraindre d'associer les Idoles au Dieu d'Israel. Mais sans se livrer à des conjectures incertaines, il est sûr que l'Empereur en servant les Juifs selon leur goût, s'immortalisoit selon le sien. Le temple sorti de ses ruines contre le plan des Ecritures, eût été le monument éternel d'une victoire remportée par l'Idolatrie sur les deux Religions qui faisoient profession de la combattre.³⁴

[aimed at no less than destroying at once the Christian and the Jewish revelation. If Julian had succeeded, Jesus Christ had no longer been the object of the old testament, which, look'd upon in any other point of light [*sic*], must have appeared to any but a Jew, no more than a heap of vain ceremonies, falsities and contradictions, the work of policy, enthusiasm and temerity. The edifice of Christianity, having now no longer the ancient revelation for its foundation, would be left to hang in the air, and must of course fall to the ground. 'Tis said also that his design was, when he had defeated the Christians by the Jews, to attack these also in their turn, and to constrain them to associate his idols with the God of Israel. But without giving into dubious conjectures, it is certain that the emperor, by serving the Jews according to their taste, immortalised himself according to his own. The temple rising from its ruins, contrary to the whole plan of the Scriptures, would have been the eternal monument of a victory gain'd by idolatry over the two religions, whose profession it was to contend with it.]³⁵

Warburton seems to concur:

³² Perhaps only from Jerusalem, which they were permitted to visit annually.

³³ La Blérierie, 1746a, pp. 248–9. ³⁴ La Blérierie, 1735, pp. 375–6.

³⁵ La Blérierie, 1746a, pp. 250–1.

the Law is full of Allegories, and figurative representations . . . dependent upon, and preparatory to the *Gospel*: which, being its *end* and completion, required to have some idea of itself delineated in the *means*. But this, which shews Allegories to be reasonable in the *Old Testament*, shews the folly of expecting them in the *New*. For when the substance was come in, and full light, the shadow was of course to be cast behind.³⁶

What Warburton is for some reason not saying here is that Christians do not employ allegory in the pagan sense of the discovery of esoteric and mystical meanings by a chosen few, but in that of typology: the Temple is the type of the Church, the Chosen People that of the church universal. These patterns are not discovered by philosophy; they are revealed by prophecy, and it is curious that La Bléterie and Warburton alike have so little to say in these passages of the role of the Davidic Psalms and the Exilic prophets in making the Old Testament preparatory to the New. Had Julian succeeded, however, in restoring Temple worship, he would have taken the God of Israel under the protection of Iamblichan theurgy and allegory in the neo-Platonic sense. ‘The local and national deity of the Jews’, Gibbon says, ‘was sincerely adored by a polytheist who desired only to multiply the number of the gods’;³⁷ but he tells us neither what the Jewish response to this might have been, nor whether Julian was acquainted with Philo of Alexandria (of such significance to Mosheim)³⁸ or with those schools of Jewish Platonism which might either have prepared the way for the Fourth Gospel³⁹ or have offered Julian the prospect of Hellenising the Temple. La Bléterie had envisaged this as ‘dubious conjecture’,⁴⁰ and one can imagine Julian repeating the mistakes of his Macedonian and Roman predecessors. It is Warburton, however, who points out that his enterprise would have intruded allegory in a pagan sense upon a Christian. His words just quoted are preceded by the following:

This mysterious Genius of Paganism, together with its popular absurdities, naturally and necessarily produced a method of teaching, which always pleases the imagination in proportion as it disgusts the understanding, that is to say, the method of Allegory. An art excellently filled to *cover* the old nonsense of the *vulgar* Gentilism, and to ornament the new inventions of the *Philosophic*; but very abhorrent of the nature of Christianity, where everything was rational and everything clear and open,⁴¹

for reasons Warburton had already set out. Unlike the unequivocal claims of faith upon the understanding,

³⁶ Warburton, 1751, pp. xxxii–xxxiii. ³⁷ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 888.

³⁸ *RFT*, pp. 207–8. ³⁹ Above, pp. 88–89. ⁴⁰ La Bléterie, 1746a, p. 250.

⁴¹ Warburton, 1751, pp. xxxi–xxxii.

Uncertainty is not the *state and condition* of the Sceptic's knowledge, but the *Principle and Genius* of it; And it was departing from the fundamental laws of their profession to acknowledge any thing Certain. As for the enthusiastic part of this Sect, which was now daily getting ground, the *magic* to which they were so madly given kept them confined within its circle. This mysterious Genius of Paganism ...⁴²

Later Platonism had been fundamentally Academic and sceptical, which was how allegory had led it to the discovery of daimons rather than ideas. This was how Julian would have Hellenised the God of Israel had he had the chance. By contrast, Warburton was saying, the Christian revelation was one of plain facts interpretable by reason; but why, Gibbon wanted to know, had it introduced disputatious theology into the historical world? This, however, was not the issue raised by the Fall of the Temple, or by Julian's plan for restoring it. Allegory and typology had been means of preparing the understanding for the advent of Christ; with that advent they had ceased to be necessary, and the Temple with them. To retain allegory, said the pagan quotation in Warburton's sub-title, was to abandon *necessaria* in favour of *supervacanea*.⁴³ At the moment of Christ's death on the cross – Hugh Blair was preaching about the time when Gibbon wrote chapter 23 – all antetypes were exhausted and nothing remained but the reality of redemption.⁴⁴ Warburton, a quarter-century earlier, had declared it an actual necessity for Jesus to prophesy the destruction of the Temple;⁴⁵ perhaps it was this that moved Gibbon to the acid footnote:

The secret intentions of Julian are revealed by the late⁴⁶ bishop of Gloucester, the learned and dogmatic Warburton; who, with the authority of a theologian, prescribed the motives and conduct of the Supreme Being.⁴⁷

Since the Temple enterprise came to nothing, Gibbon is indifferent to Julian's 'secret intentions' regarding the Jews, as he is to how the communities of the diaspora might have responded to them. His intentions regarding the Christians are another matter, and Gibbon here inserts a lengthy account⁴⁸ of Christian Jerusalem, the city re-created by

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. xxx–xxxi, note g. ⁴³ *Ibid.*, tp. He gives the source as Seneca.

⁴⁴ *RFT*, p. 334. ⁴⁵ Warburton, 1751, pp. 18–19. ⁴⁶ Warburton had died in 1778.

⁴⁷ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 888, n. 71. Warburton went further still. Following his apocalyptic bent, he saw the allegorisation of Christianity as leading to the two medieval triumphs of Antichrist: the rise of the papacy in an age of barbarism and religion – 'a Spiritual Dominion, which took advantage of the disorders occasioned by the continued inroads of savage spoilers, to strike its roots deep and wide in the fat and lumpish soil of Gothic Barbarism' – and the threat of Islam, represented by the Turks, 'a powerful nation of fierce Enthusiasts' (Warburton, 1751, pp. xxxiv, xxxviii). Cf. East Aporthor; *RFT*, pp. 340–1.

⁴⁸ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 885–6.

Constantine and his mother Helena. With the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the discovery of the True Cross, Jerusalem became the goal and seat of a thriving tourist industry, attracting 'a successive crowd of pilgrims from the shores of the Atlantic Ocean and the most distant countries of the East'.⁴⁹ With his own visit to Rome no doubt in mind, Gibbon remarks:

Sages and heroes, who have visited the memorable scenes of ancient wisdom or glory, have confessed the inspiration of the genius of the place; and the Christian who knelt before the holy sepulchre ascribed his lively faith and his fervent devotion to the more immediate influence of the Divine Spirit.⁵⁰

The *genius loci* has become the Holy Ghost, and the religion of sages and heroes the faith in redemption. To that extent polytheism is being replaced by enthusiasm, though pilgrimage is an aid to renewal of the former; but something else is at work. Pilgrimage gives rise to a massive sale and creation of relics (in particular fragments of the Cross), whose obvious fraudulence Christians may deplore but cannot abolish. They recognise

not only that the streets of Jerusalem were filled with the incessant tumult of business and pleasure, but that every species of vice – adultery, theft, idolatry, poisoning, murder – was familiar to the inhabitants of the holy city.⁵¹

Gibbon is not merely jeering at Christianity, or noting a phenomenon deplored by Fathers and Catholics before it was denounced by Protestants and philosophers. In a later chapter we will find him emphasising shrines and relics as two signs of the mutation of Christianity into a saint-worshipping quasi-polytheism – the voice of Conyers Middleton is audible here⁵² – and it is at this point in chapter 23 that he begins to relate its passage from a religion of enthusiasm to one of superstition. In chapter 16 the primitive Christians were shown as seen by their persecutors, as these were perceived by the historian: as a sect of enthusiasts following a revelation of their own, made (they said) to all mankind, and cutting themselves off from civil society and imperial authority because every social act was patronised by gods they denounced as demons.⁵³ But the corruption of Christianity at its focal point in Jerusalem is a sign that this religion is becoming reconciled with late antique urban culture, even in its more debased forms; and travel through social space and the traffic in material objects are signs of the simultaneous and inseparable growths of sociability and superstition. The restoration of the Temple would

⁴⁹ p. 886. ⁵⁰ *Ibid.* ⁵¹ p. 887. ⁵² *RFT*, pp. 227–8; Trevor-Roper, 2010, ch. 5.

⁵³ *RFT*, pp. 255–7.

presumably have led, in Julian's mind, to the displacement if not disappearance of Christian Jerusalem; so that he is – as indeed he declared – no longer a persecutor of Christians as a sect defiant of civil society and imperial authority, but is struggling to undo the increasing integration of Christianity with both. Rather than persecuting the church as an extra-social sect, he is in fact trying to restore it to that condition. The Temple project is only one means to that end, which he never achieves.

(III)

A just and severe censure has been inflicted on the law which prohibited the Christians from teaching the arts of grammar and rhetoric.⁵⁴

This measure has indeed found few supporters. Ammianus himself, cited here by Gibbon, calls it ungenerous (*inclemens*) and deserving of perpetual oblivion,⁵⁵ but does not elaborate or explain this judgement. He twice pronounces it,⁵⁶ each time in the context of a general summation of Julian's good and bad qualities; that is to say, within the conventions of classical and rhetorical historiography. For La Bléterie and Gibbon it is another matter; each situates the prohibition in the context of a detailed examination of Julian's policy towards the Christians, which each considers one of indirect persecution. Both are moderns in Gibbon's sense, living in an age of legal and religious controversy which furnishes them with contexts of argument and narrative. The circumstance that La Bléterie is a Christian and a Jansenist, Gibbon Enlightened and a sceptic, does not prevent them from telling much the same story and arriving from opposed assumptions at much the same judgement. Ammianus, a pagan undisturbed by the rise of Christianity and indifferent to philosophical and theological controversy, seems simply to consider Julian's action unjust and unworthy of an emperor; for the two moderns, it is part of the story of how he became a persecutor. For La Bléterie he is an enemy of the truth; 'there is no counsel or advice against the Lord', and his failure and death are acts of divine providence;⁵⁷ whereas for Gibbon he is 'in danger of violating the laws of justice and toleration which he had so recently established'.⁵⁸ It is the problem of toleration that concerns Gibbon; he is examining how an apparently tolerant philosopher-emperor can become both enthusiastic and intolerant.

Both histories tell the same story, agreeing that Julian's intentions were hostile towards Christianity from the time of his accession for much the

⁵⁴ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 892. ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, n. 89.

⁵⁶ Ammianus, xxii, 10; xxv, 5. Rolfe, 1939/1986, II, pp. 256–7, 512–13.

⁵⁷ La Bléterie, 1746a, p. 141. ⁵⁸ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 894.

same reasons; but for La Bléterie he is an apostate hating the religion he has abandoned, while for Gibbon, he intends, at least initially, no more than Christianity's disestablishment. The narrative they relate includes the edict against teaching with the projected restoration of the Temple, Julian's increasingly hostile measures in a variety of fields, and his writings and actions during his winter at Antioch before departing for the Persian campaign. Unlike Ammianus, however, both are obliged to combine the narrative with a variety of disquisitions on these matters, of which one is the prohibition of Christian teaching of literature. Though both deal with it at some length, it occupies in Gibbon's historiography a complex and revealing role.

It is common ground, then, that Julian was altogether opposed to a resumption of persecution as it had been before Constantine's reversal of policy; not only out of his genuine humanity and determination not to be a tyrant, not only – one may add – because he lacked the power to engage in it, but because he had perceived that the making of martyrs was counter-productive. La Bléterie quotes the pagan Libanius as saying that those who do not apostasise under persecution are generally admired, whereas those who do are despised even by themselves.⁵⁹ Julian therefore decides to proceed indirectly, by means apparently moderate and gentle; though the Temple project, with its implied assault on Christian prophecy and typology, is perhaps an instance of Julian's increasing impatience in the winter of 362–3. He aims at a progressive withdrawal of imperial favour from the Christians and its transfer to those who have remained pagans or wish to be so again. Here toleration is seen to be an act of state, not a withdrawal of the state from action; his invitation to all Christian sects to express their views is not merely a means of weakening and exhausting them, but an indication that the state's authority can and will operate without them. As Gibbon has indicated by the use of capital letters,⁶⁰ the invitation to pagans to reopen *all* their temples is aimed at the re-paganisation of those which have been taken over as Christian churches, while the recall of all Christian bishops from exile leaves the question of the restoration of Nicene or Arian bishops to contested sees one which the state cannot neglect but is free to determine arbitrarily if it so chooses. Julian is on dangerous ground even where he professes indifference. Pagans will be preferred to Christians not only in judicial decisions, but in making appointments to imperial or municipal office; and there emerges a policy of excluding Christians by degrees from the latter, necessary if Julian is to carry out his dream of an imperial anti-church

⁵⁹ La Bléterie, 1746a, pp. 137–8. ⁶⁰ Above, p. 179.

based on municipal paganism and theurgic philosophy. He is shown re-paganising the army by making the burning of incense part of the ceremony of re-enlistment,⁶¹ and La Bléterie precedes Gibbon in remarking that measures like these won back many who had adopted Christianity as a means to office.⁶² There begins to appear a scheme of extinguishing Christianity by expelling it from civil authority and even civil society, and the historians – not excluding Gibbon⁶³ – ask themselves whether Julian, had he lived longer, would have proceeded from indirect persecution to persecution by fire and sword when the reduction of the church to a handful of marginalised sects made it safe to do so.⁶⁴

The edict against teaching emerges at the heart of this policy. Gibbon says:

In all the cities of the Roman world the education of the youth was intrusted to masters of grammar and rhetoric, who were elected by the magistrates, maintained at the public expense, and distinguished by many lucrative and honourable privileges. The edict of Julian appears to have included the physicians, and professors of all the liberal arts; and the emperor, who reserved to himself the approbation of the candidates, was authorised by the laws to corrupt, or to punish, the religious constancy of the most learned of the Christians. As soon as the resignation of the more obstinate teachers had established the unrivalled dominion of the Pagan sophists, Julian invited the rising generation to resort with freedom to the public schools, in a just confidence that their tender minds would receive the impressions of literature and idolatry. If the greater part of the Christian youth should be deterred by their own scruples, or by those of their parents, from accepting this dangerous mode of instruction, they must, at the same time, relinquish the benefits of a liberal education. Julian had reason to expect that, in the space of a few years, the church would relapse into its primeval simplicity, and that the theologians, who possessed an adequate share of the learning and eloquence of the age, would be succeeded by a generation of blind and ignorant fanatics, incapable of defending the truth of their own principles, or of exposing the various follies of Polytheism.⁶⁵

Gibbon is in fact attacking the establishment of a state church with a monopoly of higher education. It would be interesting to know whether there is any comment from contemporary Dissent upon this passage. Greco-Roman antiquity was a culture of rhetoric and literature, and the education he describes was required before admission into either the imperial bureaucracy or the senatorial aristocracy. By excluding

⁶¹ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 883–4.

⁶² La Bléterie, 1746a, p. 145; Womersley, 1994, I, p. 884. ⁶³ Below, p. 195.

⁶⁴ La Bléterie, 1746a, p. 141: 'Tis pretended that he was resolved to go to the last extremity, when the Christians should be reduced to a small number; and his long patience seem'd to have given him a right to make use of severity.'

⁶⁵ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 893–4.

Christians directly from teaching and indirectly from learning their inheritance of literature, Julian aimed at excluding them from office, and from the whole body of a ruling culture. They would become much what the Jews were to find themselves in Christian society: a despised and marginalised sect, practising their cultural and theological eccentricity under a toleration which excluded them from membership.

In later chapters of the *Decline and Fall*, Gibbon displays an interest in Christianities distant from Greco-Roman culture: Nestorians in Syria and Central Asia, Monophysites in Ethiopia.⁶⁶ Here, however, behind the revelation of what may have been Julian's long-term objective, there is an unstated irony crucial to the history of Christianity as Gibbon sees it. To deny Christians an education in letters and rhetoric must be to deny them something they desired and were acquiring; something which the fair-minded Ammianus thought it reasonable they should have and unjust to deny them. Yet this literature was founded throughout on the imagery of the pagan gods, and if, as Julian was happy to point out, Christians thought these gods demons and their literature amoral, it was not unreasonable to suggest that they ought not to teach it.⁶⁷ Two things were happening: Christians were entering the governing classes in significant numbers, and pagans like Ammianus had no objection to their doing so; and they were prepared to come to terms with a pre-Christian cultural heritage in order to do so. As we know, Christians were deeply divided, among and within themselves, as to whether they ought to be doing this; Jerome in the next century was to dream that he was being flogged by the angels for being a Ciceronian and not a Christian; and means were being sought for the reconciliation of rhetoric with faith. The pagan world might be re-imagined as an antetype of the Christian, thus continuing the allegorisation and Platonisation of Christianity;⁶⁸ or the pagan virtues might be admired as secular alongside the Christian, thus laying the foundation of a more or less Christian humanism. All this meant, however, that something profound was happening to late Roman Christianity as perceived by Gibbon.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Nestorians, Womersley, 1994, II, p. 982; Monophysites, II, p. 987; Ethiopia, II, p. 997; and chapter 47 in general.

⁶⁷ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 893.

⁶⁸ It has recently been asserted (Cameron, 2011; Brown, 2011) that pagans and Christians were united in their acceptance of classical literature, and that no profound conflict need be supposed. If this was the case in Julian's day, his policy was the more mistaken and the argument put forward here would seem to be reinforced.

⁶⁹ Gregory Nazianzen's *Invectives Against Julian* (King, 1888) are powerful specimens of what rhetoric became in the hands of Christians who knew both Plato and the Bible. He denounces Julian for denying the faithful access to *logoi*, meaning letters, as a path to Christ, the Logos incarnate.

In chapters 15 and 16, he had portrayed the primitive Christians as a sect of enthusiasts, self-exiled from civil society and persecuted by it, in consequence of their absolute refusal to have anything to do with the gods of a society that worshipped itself; they had condemned as superstition and idolatry any proposed partner to a revelation made to all men but valid only for those who accepted it. This was the religion Decius and Diocletian had persecuted as a republic within the empire, acknowledging no authority but its own and initiating modern history by this refusal. Constantine had gone into an undefined partnership with it, but had certainly not imposed it upon the civilisation of empire. In Julian's time it was beginning to pervade empire, to seek admission to office and to accept the culture of empire at the risk of accepting its rhetoric, literature and superstition. Julian was trying to reverse the process and – himself an enthusiast of another persuasion – to force it back into the character of an underground sect. His persecution was an attempt to return Christianity to the condition which had led to its persecution in the first place. The question might now be how successfully the church could resist him by entrenching itself in society.

It was doing so at a level affecting popular culture in Antioch, at one affecting actual power in Alexandria. Gibbon deals with both in that order in chapter 23, but as events in Antioch lead to the narrative of Julian's sojourn there in chapter 24, the highly significant character of what occurred in Alexandria may be dealt with first. The emperor had tried to distance himself from the Arian controversy by recalling all exiled bishops and encouraging them to fight out their theological disputes under his malicious eye; and, says Gibbon:

He was perfectly satisfied, before he dismissed them from his presence, that he had nothing to dread from the union of the Christians,⁷⁰

which, says La Blérierie, 'would have made him tremble' had it happened.⁷¹ He found, however, if he did not anticipate, that matters were more complex than these words suggest. It was one thing to recall bishops from exile, another to decide whether they should be restored to their sees and those who had replaced them in disputed circumstances expelled; and there were theological factions violently competing for the possession of churches. Julian may have hoped to make such disputes a matter of indifference to his imperial authority, but it is the argument of the *Decline and Fall* that bishops came to exercise power, in the control of cities as well as churches, which emperors could not afford to neglect. This was peculiarly the case of Alexandria, where names already potent in

⁷⁰ p. 897. ⁷¹ La Blérierie, 1746a, p. 152.

Gibbon's text now reappear. Julian's former tutor George of Cappadocia had been made its bishop at the exile of Athanasius, and since he appears to have been a criminal racketeer it is not surprising to learn that some weeks before the return of Athanasius from his underground activities⁷² George was lynched by an angry mob. Gibbon seems to follow Julian in thinking he was killed by pagans; 'the inactivity of the Athanasian party was esteemed a shining example of evangelical patience';⁷³ and after noting the process, 'not absolutely certain, but *extremely* probable', by which George of Cappadocia became St George of England,⁷⁴ his emphasis falls on Julian's letter to the Alexandrians in which he assumes the guilty to have been pagans and does no more than mildly rebuke them. Favour, not persecution, is to be Julian's instrument of repressive tolerance; but the consequences of George's death are to be more than he can manage. The hero of theological debate re-emerges.

After the tumult of Alexandria had subsided, Athanasius, amidst the public acclamations, seated himself on the throne from whence his unworthy competitor had been precipitated: and as the zeal of the archbishop was tempered with discretion, the exercise of his authority tended not to inflame, but to reconcile, the minds of the people. His pastoral labours were not confined to the narrow limits of Egypt. The state of the Christian world was present to his active and capacious mind; and the age, the merit, the reputation of Athanasius, enabled him to assume, in a moment of danger, the office of Ecclesiastical Dictator.⁷⁵

Whatever Gibbon may have intended by capitalising these initials, we are at a climactic moment over which Julian exercises no power. The history of Christian controversy has reappeared, and it is being settled without submission to the emperor's authority, by the lifelong champion of the Trinity who is at the same time superior as a statesman and negotiator to 'the degenerate sons of Constantine'.⁷⁶

Three years were not yet elapsed since the majority of the bishops of the West had, ignorantly or reluctantly, subscribed the Confession of Rimini.⁷⁷ ... By the wisdom of a select synod, to which the name and presence of Athanasius gave the authority of a general council, the bishops who had unwarily deviated into error were admitted to the communion of the church, on the easy condition of subscribing the Nicene Creed, without any formal acknowledgment of their past fault, or any minute definition of their scholastic opinions.⁷⁸

Athanasius has won over a large fragment of the homoiousian party to the homoousian position (the anomoians do not appear in the story) by a

⁷² Barnes, 1993, p. 155. ⁷³ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 902.

⁷⁴ pp. 902–3, nn. 124–5. Gibbon's emphasis. ⁷⁵ p. 904. ⁷⁶ Above, p. 129.

⁷⁷ Above, p. 118.

⁷⁸ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 904. Note the word 'scholastic' with its medieval connotations.

policy the exact reversal and mirror image of that pursued by Arians since the days of Eusebius of Nicomedia: subscription to a minimally dogmatic formula which scarcely conceals the ascendancy of the party proposing it.⁷⁹ The Nicenes are now in the ascendant, as the Arians were at Rimini; and it is less than twenty years from the Council of Alexandria to that of Constantinople, when the Nicene formula will be made universal and obligatory.⁸⁰ The adventures of Athanasius, however, are not over. Julian is infuriated by the success of his policies and the growth of his authority; the emperor's antipathy to Christians becomes increasingly spiteful and unjust; and the archbishop retreats once more to the Thebaid after a decree of exile whose language can be read as an incitement to murder. Gibbon sees faults on both sides: 'if the deadly spirit of fanaticism perverted the heart and understanding of a virtuous prince', the Christians were not free from 'human passions, religious enthusiasm . . . the insolent vices of prosperity, and the habit of believing that the saints alone were entitled to reign over the earth'.⁸¹ They believed, as did La Bléterie, that Julian intended a full-scale persecution after his return from the Persian campaign, and they indicated that in that event their resistance might not be confined to passive martyrdom.

It is impossible to determine how far the zeal of Julian would have prevailed over his good sense and humanity; but, if we seriously reflect on the strength and spirit of the church, we shall be convinced that, before the emperor could have extinguished the religion of Christ, he must have involved his country in the horrors of civil war.⁸²

These are the last words of chapter 23. Gibbon is weighing possibilities; but the likelihood that Julian might have embarked on fully repressive persecution receives slightly less emphasis than the power and militancy of the Christians. Perhaps we are to imagine that some powerful bishop, less adroit than Athanasius, might have led his city into opposition that only armed force could put down; and that some ambitious general – we do not know if Julian had any plans for the imperial succession – might have assumed the purple in the Christian cause. All Gibbon is telling us is that the church and its affairs were becoming more entrenched in Roman society than Julian's policy of discrimination and segregation behind a mask of toleration might have found it easy to isolate and render impotent. He was to discover how deeply Christianity was digging itself into popular culture during his unhappy months at Antioch.

⁷⁹ Above, pp. 100–02, 113–17, 118–20. ⁸⁰ Below, pp. 283–84.

⁸¹ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 906–7. ⁸² p. 908.

11 The sojourn at Antioch and the Persian disaster

(I)

Chapter 24 of the *Decline and Fall*, which concludes the set of chapters on the *vie et histoire* of Julian and his reign, is unlike its predecessors but like them anomalous in the progress of Gibbon's history. It is like them in its nearness to obsession with a single personality, but unlike them in reaching a point where we no longer hear Julian's voice or the voices responding to him, but instead hear the voice of a single historian, of an importance to Gibbon comparable with that of Julian himself. This historian is Ammianus Marcellinus, whose voice we have been hearing since Julian was made Caesar and appointed to Gaul, together with the voices of others; but from the moment in chapter 24 when Julian leaves Antioch and embarks on his fatal campaign against the Persian empire, Ammianus's is virtually the only narrative voice we hear and there are no more of Julian's reflections on himself or the replies of others to them. Libanius, close to the Julian we have come to know, is only indirectly an authority on the Persian campaign, and Julian's philosophy and self-image are no immediate part of his failure as a general. From the point mentioned, Gibbon has little more to do than follow Ammianus as a narrative historian and try to understand him; we are back in the neo-classical world of the late humanist historians. Ammianus's narrative, however, contains problems enough for both Gibbon and his present-day readers; how did Gibbon deal with them?

Julian spent the winter of 362–3 at Antioch, the chief city of Roman Asia and Syria and the point of departure for his intended Persian campaign, among a people maliciously disposed to deride the haste and to censure the delays of their sovereign,¹

already sure to be wrong in their eyes whatever he did. His personality and religious policy were hopelessly out of tune with an urban populace who in

¹ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 912.

his eyes should have been ripe for a revival of urban paganism under philosophic and imperial guidance, but who had gone far towards making a cultic Christianity part of their thoroughly worldly civic culture. Gibbon had previously related Julian's first misunderstanding of them in chapter 23, before relating the return of Athanasius to Alexandria.² A problem in both cities was the return of Christianised temples to pagan control, alternatively the continuation of their Christianisation, which had figured in the fall of George of Cappadocia and over which emperors had little immediate control. Gibbon in chapter 23 had given a luscious account of the sexual freedom of the groves of Daphne, consecrated to Apollo on the outskirts of Antioch with a colossal temple and statue of that god. The 'blushing maid' and the 'vigorous youth' do not figure very much in his account of Julian at Antioch, though we are given to understand that sexual satisfactions were otherwise available to the citizens. The puritanical though pagan emperor is grieved to find that the sacrifices he loved to conduct on such a scale have virtually ceased at the temple of Apollo; he can find – as he tells us in his *Misopogon*³ – only an aged priest with a goose under his arm. Worse still, the temple grounds have been Christianised (in fact by Julian's brother Gallus) by instituting a church with the relics of the martyr-saint Babylas, around which a Christian cemetery has taken shape. Julian gives orders for the transfer of these relics to a church within the city, to which they are conducted by a vast crowd thunderously singing psalms that express disrespect for the emperor quite as much as Christian piety.⁴ Julian is being made to look ridiculous, and when the temple and statue of Apollo are mysteriously burned down that night he makes matters worse by closing the Christian cathedral (it is Gibbon's term) and confiscating its funds. He is beginning to show spitefulness towards a religion entrenching itself in the urban cultures he desires to protect against it. That Christianity is becoming cultic and superstitious in the process is no consolation to him. It is here that Gibbon begins to reflect that he could have extinguished Christianity only by military actions on a scale leading to civil war.⁵

Chapter 24 opens with consideration of Julian's literary works during the winter at Antioch, which was indeed a period of very active authorship. There is a *Banquet of the Caesars* (the *Caesares* or *Kronia*) with which this chapter opens; the *Misopogon* or *Beard-hater*, of crucial importance to most readers; and of less significance to Gibbon, the treatise *Against the Galilaeans*, surviving only in fragments and here mentioned chiefly in

² Above, pp. 193–95; Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 896–98.

³ Wright, 1913/2002, II, pp. 486–9. ⁴ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 899.

⁵ p. 903; Julian's threat to Edessa p. 908.

footnotes;⁶ and (in one footnote only⁷) the *Hymn to King Helios*, a passionate statement of Julian's philosophical worship.⁸ The *Banquet of the Caesars* receives pride of place, perhaps because it is the most secular of his writings. The gods vote on which of the Roman emperors should be admitted to their company, so that Julian has occasion to reflect for once on Roman history, and the prize goes to Marcus Aurelius, philosopher, emperor and successful frontier general in the Marcomannic war (not that Julian has much to say of this). Marcus apologises to the company for leaving a son as successor, him not trained to avoid degenerating into a tyrant; the starting point, as noted earlier,⁹ of the *Decline and Fall*. A subsidiary debate occurs between Julius Caesar and Alexander of Macedon, admitted as a competitor because his fame challenges every emperor's; he counters Caesar's conquest of barbaric Gaul with his own of Persia and India, pointing out that for three hundred years the Romans have been disputing a single province with the great empire that forever menaces the Greek and Roman world.¹⁰ The province is of course Mesopotamia, where Constantius and Sapor have been waging war for the possession of Amida, Nisibis and Bezabde;¹¹ and it is at this point that Gibbon and Ammianus remind us that an ambitious campaign against the Persian empire was preoccupying Julian's mind when he moved to Antioch and wrote all the works listed above. For the first time, the study of literary self-revelation encounters the climactic tragedy of his life and death; but if this one passage from the *Caesars* is the only point of contact between the two, it tells us remarkably little about what we most want to know. Why, instead of waging another campaign for control of Mesopotamia, did Julian march down the length of the Euphrates and attack Ctesiphon below its junction with the Tigris? If the *Caesars* cannot be expected to tell us, neither does Ammianus, and in consequence no more does Gibbon.

The *Misopogon*, written and publicly displayed by Julian during that winter, is now considered the climax of his career as a writer, and perhaps also as a ruler of civil society. The invective against the Christians, had it survived in full, might have outweighed it; but history would have been different had that happened. The *Misopogon* is deeply and intensely

⁶ These occur in chapter 23 and refer to the passages quoted and refuted by Cyril of Alexandria. Gibbon mentions the treatise in the text of p. 875, and in notes 14 (p. 868), 19 (p. 870), 21 (p. 871), 73 (p. 888). It is not considered as a product of Julian's stay at Antioch. For a full modern treatment, Athanassiadi, 1992, pp. 161–9.

⁷ p. 870, n. 19.

⁸ Wright, 1913/2002, II, pp. 341–445. Athanassiadi 1992, pp. 173 ff. and 197 ff., appears to consider it chiefly in the context of other works by Julian. Cf. Bowersock, 1978, p. 103.

⁹ Above, p. 47. ¹⁰ Wright, 1913/2002, II, pp. 386–7. ¹¹ See above, p. 53.

personal; Julian caricatures himself in order to caricature the way in which the Antiochenes are caricaturing him; his quarrel with his subjects is so painfully felt and exposed that it has been read as amounting to an abdication.¹² The work and its publication are therefore the climax of that separation between *vie* and *histoire* – alternatively, that reduction of history to the story of a single intensely self-aware personality – that, it has been argued, dominates chapters 22 through 24 of the *Decline and Fall* and Chapters 8 through 11 of this volume. But the exploration of personality to this depth was not among the developed practices of classical and rhetorical historiography, whether as written by Ammianus or by La Blérierie and Gibbon, and while all three historians relate the circumstances in which the *Misopogon* was composed and acquired its subject matter, they have less to say about its significance for Julian or for his reign. The two early moderns, furthermore, have to set it in the context of Julian's campaign against Christianity, and relate it to the Temple project and the work *Against the Galilaeans*. Ammianus is not interested in this setting, but like his modern followers gives the episode of the temple of Apollo (he does not mention the shrine of St Babylas) at Daphne a leading, though not the only role, in the alienation of Julian from the people of Antioch.¹³

He quarrels with them, as we already know, because their Christianity is cultic and municipal, already built into the urban culture he wants an institutionalised paganism to represent; festive and carnivalesque¹⁴ in ways that permit a genial disrespect for his own humourless person. The people perceive his responses and resent them as interfering and ridiculous; their jokes about his beard, stature and behaviour became less jovial and share his own anger. He makes matters worse by a well-meaning attempt to control the market price of bread (Gibbon cites Adam Smith in explaining why this was mistaken¹⁵), and the lampoons upon him grow increasingly offensive. Street humour reaches the point of declaring that Antioch was better off when ruled under the signs of the letters *chi* (Christ) and *kappa* (Konstantios/Constantius), the two figures most certain to infuriate Julian and emphasise his insecurity. Julian reaches the point of composing the *Misopogon* – that long, angry, self-abasing and deeply unimperial satire and invective – and posting its complete text on the walls of a public building;¹⁶ how the citizens managed to read it is a problem for

¹² Athanassiadi, 1992, pp. 201–24. ¹³ Ammianus, 23, 13, 1–5.

¹⁴ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 912.

¹⁵ p. 913, n. 15: 'this last I am proud to quote, as the word of a sage and a friend'. It is easy to imagine Gibbon discussing the problem with Necker and others at Paris in 1777 (above, p. 40). For Julian's account see Wright, 1913/2002, II, pp. 72–3. Ammianus, 22, 13, 4.

¹⁶ p. 915. For the full text see Wright, 1913/2002, II, pp. 412–511.

historians of material culture. He departs from Antioch, swearing that he will never revisit the city, but will set up his seat at Tarsus on his return from the Persian campaign, on which he now embarks.

Gibbon has not much to say about this disastrous error in public relations, but he proceeds to describe the efforts of the rhetor and sophist Libanius to remedy the situation.¹⁷ The orator urges Julian to forgive a city consumed with misery and self-hatred in the loss of imperial favour,¹⁸ the unstated point being that though Julian is anxious not to be a tyrant, his action is potentially tyrannical in its surrender to passion. He has already deprived Caesarea in Cappadocia of its status as a city (in consequence of its aggressive Christianity), and Gibbon must at this point be aware that in a few chapters he will be narrating how the emperor Theodosius inflicted that very punishment on Antioch itself, compelling its submission.¹⁹ It is possible to imagine how Julian's action would have worked out, and even to credit him with intending some such solution; but the story of the *Misopogon* leaves us wondering how far Julian was in control of his emotions and actions. It has been suggested²⁰ that his humiliation and rejection at Antioch convinced him that he had failed as a philosophic ruler and that he swung to the opposite extreme in the *hubris* of the Persian campaign. That narrative is the remaining problem in the historiography of Julian the Apostate.

(II)

The initial problem of Julian's Persian campaign seems to be twofold. In the first place, given that the area in dispute between the Roman and Persian empires was that known as Mesopotamia, between the upper basins of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers – where Constantius and Shapur/Sapor had been campaigning as recently as 360 – why did Julian march south and attack Ctesiphon, near the point where the two rivers join to flow to the Persian Gulf? Secondly, are historians able to answer this question in terms of a strategic and imperial policy adopted by Julian as a Roman emperor; or is it to be answered, like others affecting his reign, in terms of his personality, his vision of himself, who he was and what he might and should achieve? As questions in Roman history, these may be put to experts in that field; as questions in the history of historiography – the subject of this book – we have to begin by admitting that Gibbon and

¹⁷ pp. 916–17. ¹⁸ Norman, 1969/1987, I, pp. 158–61, 183–91, 196–9, 214–21.

¹⁹ *DF*, III, ch. 27; Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 53–5; below, p. 298.

²⁰ Athanassiadi, 1992; see n. 12 above.

the historians he drew upon are remarkably uninformative about both of them.

Gibbon begins his narrative by acknowledging that Julian had a choice of strategies.²¹ He led his large army as far as Carrhae, where he must choose between the Tigris and Euphrates basins. Here he commissions a reserve army, commanded by his kinsman Procopius and one Sebastian, charged with advancing through Mesopotamia to the Tigris, making contact with the satellite kingdom of Armenia, and at need turning south to support Julian's operations. At this moment or soon after, there springs up a rumour, in itself not very likely but important in its consequences, that he encouraged Procopius to claim the purple in the event of Julian's death in the field. Ammianus mentions the tale at this point²² with evident mistrust, but Gibbon says nothing of it here, though he tells us of the strategic role assigned to Procopius.²³ The rumour, baseless, will figure among Jovian's motives for his treaty with the Persians after Julian's death,²⁴ but Gibbon defers mention of it until recounting Procopius's subsequent rebellion against Valens and Valentinian.²⁵ In separating the story of Procopius from that of Jovian, Gibbon avoids the question whether Julian had any policy towards the problem of imperial succession,²⁶ which will resume its central significance in the history of the Decline and Fall. Julian conducts his main force down the Euphrates, with Ctesiphon as his strategic objective; it is his failure there which will destroy his reign.

What does all this mean? Roman emperors had marched south before; Trajan had looked on the Gulf, and Carus in the third century had captured Ctesiphon and its sister city, and might have used them to impose a treaty on the Persians but for his own mysterious death.²⁷ There was a maxim of state to the effect that Roman power might reach Ctesiphon but no further.²⁸ It is then possible – though neither Ammianus nor Gibbon seems to envisage it – that Julian was pursuing a strategy of empire, aimed at altering the balance of power in the region of the two rivers. Rome and Persia had a long history of war tempered by diplomacy,

²¹ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 919–20.

²² Ammianus, 23, 3, 1 (Rolfe, 1939/1986, II, pp. 320–1).

²³ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 919. ²⁴ Below, pp. 210–11.

²⁵ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 969 (chapter 25). See below, pp. 218, 220.

²⁶ See, however, p. 946.

²⁷ *EEG*, p. 349. It is curious that neither Ammianus nor Gibbon seems to suggest that Trajan's march down the Tigris from Armenia to the Gulf, subduing kingdoms as he went – described by Gibbon himself in chapter 1 (Womersley, 1994, I, p. 36) – might have been in Julian's mind as an achievement he might emulate. Trajan of course had chosen not to maintain his conquests.

²⁸ Mentioned by Gibbon, *EEG*, p. 350.

in which provinces might change hands but neither empire aimed to destroy the other. Sapor – to continue using Gibbon's spelling – had sent an embassy to enquire into Julian's intentions; but he had refused to treat with it, saying that he was coming in person to press his demands.²⁹

Here we take leave of rational strategy, and begin entertaining thoughts of visionary enthusiasm. As philosopher-king, Julian possessed means of seeing himself as a godlike being, and these must obsess those who study him, as in his writings they obsessed him; but there is no point at which we can observe the mutation of philosopher into conqueror. There remains the figure of Alexander, who conquered and began to Hellenise the Persian empire as far as the borders of India, and in the *Banquet of the Caesars* he confronts both the conqueror Julius Caesar and the philosopher Marcus Aurelius. It is Marcus, however, who wins the votes of the gods.

In spite of this decision, the historians are unable to account for Julian's Persian campaign without supposing his self-identification with Alexander. Gibbon observes:

A prince, who delineates with freedom the vices and virtues of his predecessors, subscribes, in every line, the censure or approbation of his own conduct.

In the cool moments of reflection, Julian preferred the useful and benevolent virtues of Antoninus;³⁰ but his ambitious spirit was inflamed by the glory of Alexander, and he solicited, with equal ardour, the esteem of the wise and the applause of the multitude . . . The successor of Cyrus and Artaxerxes was the only rival whom he deemed worthy of his arms, and he resolved, by the final conquest of Persia, to chastise the haughty nation which had so long resisted and insulted the majesty of Rome.³¹

This is part of a wholly conventional rhetoric, which leaves Julian's youthful search for glory unconnected and uncontrasted with his *persona* as a philosopher; Gibbon is making no attempt to relate the two to one another. The Christian authors, Tillemont and La Bléterie, are rather nearer to doing so, since they see Julian's *hubris* as the effect of his apostasy. A mind that has deserted the Christian truth is exposed to superstition, enthusiasm and fantasy; La Bléterie considers a suggestion by Socrates Scholasticus that Julian thought himself the reincarnation of Alexander, and while rejecting it agrees that he may have believed that he possessed Alexander's virtues.³² Gibbon, who took a different view of Julian's 'vanity', had not this recourse; nor does he take up (as La Bléterie does) Ammianus's account of Julian on the march rejecting a series of ill omens warning him against continuing the expedition.³³

²⁹ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 911. ³⁰ i.e. Marcus Aurelius. ³¹ pp. 910–11.

³² La Bléterie, 1746a, pp. 201–2. ³³ Rolfe, 1939/1986, II, pp. 312–15, 318–19, 336–43.

Julian even ignores an urgent letter from Sallustius, prefect of the Gauls, his colleague in the consulship and principal lieutenant in the western provinces.³⁴ Ammianus is giving the classic account of the hero – he knew and admired Julian – convinced that the gods are with him and doomed to outrun their favour. Something more than *hubris* is involved, however, when we learn that the *haruspices* whose role it was to interpret omens read them all as unfavourable but were overridden by ‘the philosophers’.³⁵ Perhaps these merely gave natural explanations of the omens; but if the term denotes Maximus and Priscus, Julian’s companions, it should be remembered that these men were theurgists and may have told Julian that he was among the gods and could command fortune. We do not know, however, because Ammianus is content to give us the standard narrative of *virtus*, *fortuna* and *hubris*, and Gibbon is content to follow him. From the march to Carrhae onward, chapter 24 is Gibbon’s rehearsal of Ammianus’s narrative, with little critical or philosophical reflection.

There remains the problem of what Gibbon meant, or thought Julian meant, by ‘the final conquest of Persia’. Here the similitude with Alexander breaks down. After destroying Darius’s army at Gaugamela, he had made himself master of Iran as far as the borders of India. Julian was attempting no such thing; in marching south to Ctesiphon, he was following other emperors before him, and we can think of a ‘final conquest of Persia’ only in terms of a defeat of Shapur near the junction of the rivers, followed by a dictated peace which would have left Rome the master of their combined basins. Certainly, this was what Julian failed to achieve, and it is a temptation to suppose that he intended it. The difficulty is that Ammianus gives us no account of his intentions; we are not told what was in Sallustius’s letter, and there is no debate of the familiar rhetorical kind, in which opposed strategies are argued and one adopted. Julian’s *hubris*, while evident, remains a subplot. Gibbon follows Ammianus, for as long as he can.

There is one early modern criticism of Julian’s actions which Gibbon could have known. William Howel, writing a century before,³⁶ had denounced him for venturing, out of sheer vanity and thirst for glory, on an enterprise in which he risked losing far more than he could hope to gain; the loss of his army would have meant

³⁴ Ammianus, 23, 5, 4 (Rolfe, 1939/1986, II, pp. 334–7). Not mentioned by Gibbon. Ammianus mentions Sallustius as prefect of Gaul, but his consulship has been noted at 23, 1, 1 (Rolfe, 1939/1986, II, pp. 310–11).

³⁵ Ammianus, 23, 5, 9 (Rolfe, II, 1939/1986, pp. 338–9). La Bléterie, 1746a, p. 270.

³⁶ EEG, pp. 33–4.

the Destruction of the Provinces. . . . And yet the Kingdom of *Persia*, though not to be named on the same day with the Empire of *Rome*, was too great a Prize to be won at one cast, nor with such a lucky hit as was that of *Alexander*. One Battel would not do it, nor many more: many Armies he could not but expect out of the Overthrows and Ruines of some, which possibly he might have defeated.³⁷

Not much might be known about the structure and resources of Sassanid empire, but it would not have been beyond Gibbon's capacity to go deeper into the narrative than he does.

(III)

With Hormisdas, an exiled Persian prince, among his cavalry commanders – we are not told whether he was thought of as politically useful – Ammianus's Julian leads his army down the Euphrates, and arrives at the highly irrigated and urbanised territory known as Assyria, at and above the junction of the rivers, with its twin cities of Colche and Ctesiphon. The story is told heroically, in terms of Julian's prowess, with a subplot of sinister omens and a lengthy description of the Persian empire by way of digression.³⁸ Gibbon follows Ammianus, having no alternative, except that he substitutes a brief description of the empire supplied by modern geographers and travellers;³⁹ orientalist, it is worth noting, in the antique manner and not written to justify a European imperialism that had not yet taken shape. Before Ctesiphon Julian arrives at the strategic goal of his campaign, and we are left interrogating Ammianus and Gibbon alike as to what that strategy was and how he failed to execute it. Confronting his generals with his decision rather than asking their advice,⁴⁰ he flings his main force, by way of a canal linking the Euphrates with the Tigris, on to the east bank of the latter river, where he faces both the garrison of Ctesiphon and the expected arrival of Shapur's main army, of which an advance force of heavy lancers and elephants⁴¹ is defeated by the first Roman assault. The historians, intent on praising Julian, leave the Persian king an under-narrated figure; he has not desired this war, is slow in mobilising, and would not be averse to a negotiated settlement. We see him moving from mystification as to what Julian is about, to exploitation of the opportunities offered him.

³⁷ Howel[I], 1680, II, p. 211.

³⁸ Ammianus, 23, 6, 1–88; Rolfe, 1939/1986, II, pp. 349–99.

³⁹ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 919, nn. 34–6; 923, n. 49; 924, n. 52; 925–6, esp. 925, nn. 54, 55; combining the observations of ancient and modern geographers. For Gibbon's use of D'Anville and other French geographers, see Abbatista, 1997.

⁴⁰ pp. 993–4. ⁴¹ Rolfe, 1939/1986, II, pp. 460–1.

The garrison of Ctesiphon is defeated in the open field, but the legions are held back from rushing an open gate by a general who does not want them charging into the city with only one exit behind them.⁴² At this point there occurs a historiographic disaster, obscuring without concealing a historical tragedy. There is a lacuna in the text of Ammianus's history,⁴³ with the result that we pass without a break from Julian ignoring his generals to cross the Tigris to Julian holding a council of war which resolves that it would be unwise to attack Ctesiphon directly – because, says Ammianus, the city's situation makes it *inexpugnabilis* and the king's arrival *cum metuenda multitudine* is to be feared at any moment. *Vicit sententia melior* (the better judgement prevailed).⁴⁴

From this moment Julian is without a strategy, and it is open to us to wonder whether he ever had one. La Blérierie in English translation gives a good account of his dilemma.

Julian found himself too weak to make any attempt upon Ctesiphon; and fearing to be inclosed between that capital and his enemy's army, he contented himself with laying wast [*sic*] the neighbouring countries. He challenged the Ctesiphontins to battle. But in vain did he hope by styling them cowards, to draw them in the open field: They always answered him under the protection of their walls, that, if he was desirous of fighting, he might go and meet the great king.

That monarch had no more inclination to try his forces with Julian than the inhabitants of Ctesiphon. He had such an apprehension of his power, that he was ready to yield up part of his kingdom to save the rest.⁴⁵

Roman sources always make Shapur's fear of the legions his motive for seeking a treaty, but he may have already perceived that he could exhaust the Romans by delaying action and suggesting negotiations. At this point, sources other than Ammianus tell us, he tried to get in touch with Hormisdas in the Roman camp – it is the absence of this initiative from Ammianus's text that convinces modern editors that there is a gap in it –

but Julian's purpose was fixt, resolving the part of Alexander to the last.⁴⁶

It is here that La Blérierie situates the lacuna; but Gibbon, after giving a dramatic account of Shapur's despair, delays it to a further moment. He gives, as do all authors following Ammianus, a double and even contradictory version of Julian's conduct at this moment. On the one hand

⁴² Ammianus, 24, 6, 13 (Rolfe, 1939/1986, II, pp. 462–4); Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 934–5.

⁴³ Rolfe locates it between 24, 6, 17 and 24, 7, 1; cf. Matthews, 1989, pp. 158–9. La Blérierie, 1746a, p. 300n. For Gibbon, see below.

⁴⁴ Rolfe, 1939/1986, II, pp. 466–7. ⁴⁵ La Blérierie, 1746a, pp. 299–300.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

Julian cast many an anxious look towards the North, in full expectation that, as he himself had victoriously penetrated to the capital of Sapor, the march and junction of his lieutenants, Sebastian and Procopius, would be executed with the same courage and diligence. His expectations were disappointed,

the king of Armenia refusing his support

and by the dissensions of the two generals, who were incapable of forming or executing any plan for the public service.⁴⁷

We have not heard till now that Julian's plans for operations in Assyria were dependent on support from the auxiliary army in Mesopotamia and Armenia. To stress it here suggests that Julian, or his army, were beginning to lose confidence; but that is not Gibbon's intention. He connects the loss of hope that support may arrive from the north with Julian's decision to abandon the siege of Ctesiphon and to reject any overtures that may be made by Shapur. Displaying

the inflexible firmness of a hero who remembered, most unfortunately for himself and for his country, that Alexander had uniformly rejected the propositions of Darius⁴⁸ ... he resolved ... boldly to advance into the inland provinces, till he forced his rival to contend with him, perhaps in the plains of Arbela, for the empire of Asia.⁴⁹

Gibbon is not necessarily saying that Julian has gone mad and means to repeat Alexander's march to India. Ammianus, when his narrative is resumed, says he told his generals that the kingdom of Persia was already half won, and that with guides Ammianus calls ill-omened (*infaustis ductoribus praeiviis*) he meant to march rapidly into the interior (*mediterraneas vias arripere*).⁵⁰ This need tell us no more than that he had hopes of bringing the king's army assembling beyond the Tigris to a pitched battle; but it is at this point that Gibbon, like all historians, addresses the most spectacular of Julian's actions, the burning of the transport fleet he had brought with him down the Euphrates. It is here that Gibbon places the lacuna in Ammianus, only after recounting the most colourful tale that had arisen to fill it: the story of a Persian double agent, who appeared in his camp as an apparent deserter and somehow encouraged him to burn his boats. La Blérierie had wondered why neither Libanius nor Zosimus had mentioned this triumph of misinformation, but had taken the reference to *infausti ductores* as evidence that Ammianus had believed it.⁵¹ Gibbon, having told the story in full, characteristically remarks in a footnote that it

⁴⁷ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 935. ⁴⁸ pp. 935–36. ⁴⁹ p. 936.

⁵⁰ Ammianus, 24, 7, 3; Rolfe, 1939/1986, II, pp. 467–8. ⁵¹ La Blérierie, 1746a, p. 301n.

may derive some credit from the testimony of two abbreviators (Sextus Rufus and Victor) and the casual hints of Libanius . . . and Ammianus [references omitted]. The course of genuine history is interrupted by a most unseasonable chasm in the text of Ammianus,⁵²

here mentioned for the first and only time. There could be no better illustration of the humanist assumption that what the available authorities say must be related in the narrative, and critical doubts concerning it presented in the margin. There are two possible explanations of the burning of the transports, and Gibbon puts forward both. If the Roman army was to retreat up either river, it would be a waste of manpower to haul the ships against the current, but

[i]f, on the contrary, it was advisable to advance into the inland country, the destruction of the fleet and magazines was the only measure which could save that valuable prize from the hands of the numerous and active troops which might suddenly be poured from the gates of Ctesiphon. Had the arms of Julian been victorious, we should now admire the conduct as well as the courage of a hero who, by depriving his soldiers of the hopes of a retreat, left them only the alternative of death or conquest. [n. Recollect the successful and applauded rashness of Agathocles and Cortes, who burned their ships on the coast of Africa and Mexico.]⁵³

Julian was a hero and an attractive character, and it was rhetorically proper to imagine his conduct as heroic and potentially successful. Yet there was no concealing the truth that the march ‘into the inland country’ was no more than a hopeless attempt to bring Shapur to a decisive battle he had no intention whatever of accepting, or that the alternative of retreat up river, and that river the Tigris, was open to the Romans at the time the ships were burnt. Ammianus, taking up the tale from that moment, leaves no doubt.

Dein cum metuens sibi quisque mussaret, monstraretque perspicua veritas, quod repulsu forsitan ariditate vel altitudine montium, ad aquas redire non poterit miles, tortique perfugae aperte faterentur se fefellisse,⁵⁴ concursu maximo exstingui iussae sunt flammae.

[Then, as every man murmured, in fear for his life, and manifest truth made clear, that if the dryness of the country or the high mountains made it necessary to retreat, they could not return to the waters; and as the deserters, being put to the

⁵² Womersley, 1994, I, p. 937 and n. 77. Gibbon makes Gregory Nazianzen’s *Second Invecive* the principal source for this story.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 938 and n. 82.

⁵⁴ Ammianus, 24, 7, 5. These are the words seized on by La Bléterie and others to make Ammianus support the tale of the Persian double agent.

torture, openly confessed that they had used deceit, orders were given to use the greatest efforts of the army to put out the flames.^{55]}

And in his next chapter we find omens being taken as to whether the army should attempt to return *per Assyriam* – through the province by which they had advanced – or to find a route between the Tigris and the foothills of the mountains east of it. The omens are unfavourable to either course, and the close of book 24 of Ammianus has the legions gloomily standing to arms all night, to see at the outset of book 25 the standards of Shapur's main force arriving at dawn.⁵⁶

It is clear by now that Julian's failure to bring the Persians to battle is due to a loss of morale in his army, as well as to Shapur's Fabian tactics. Gibbon is less willing to admit this than Ammianus; he has Julian advance through a normally fertile territory where the Persians have scorched the earth, before admitting that the Romans are being starved out. Philosophical history briefly appears:

This desperate but effectual method of defence can only be executed by the enthusiasm of a people who prefer their independence to their property; or by the rigour of an arbitrary government, which consults the public safety without submitting to their inclinations the liberty of choice. On the present occasion the zeal and obedience of the Persians seconded the commands of Sapor;

they act freely under despotic rule –

and the emperor was soon reduced to the scanty stock of provisions which continually wasted in his hands . . . At length, as the only practicable measure, he embraced the resolution of directing his steps towards the banks of the Tigris

intending to reach the outlying province of Corduene.⁵⁷

'The desponding troops obeyed the signal of the retreat', a word now used for the first time. Neither Gibbon nor any historian known to him seems to have explored the causes of this strategic fiasco, in which Julian seems not to have thought out exactly what he was going to do at Ctesiphon. As a reader of Voltaire, Gibbon might have compared his predicament to that of Charles XII before Poltava, and a post-Gibbonian reader to that of Napoleon at Moscow; far from his base, with no strategic objective and no alternative to retreat. It is a sad but not a necessary end to the history of a philosopher turned warrior.

His army is now retreating as a column of march, with an enemy on its flank free to send striking forces against any point from van to rear. These are more than skirmishers, described as combinations of heavy armour, horse-archers and elephants, and much is made of the successes of the

⁵⁵ Rolfe, 1939/1986, II, p. 468. ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 475. ⁵⁷ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 939–40.

Romans in deploying to meet them.⁵⁸ It is in a skirmish with Persian or Arab horsemen, however, that Julian meets his death.

His trembling guards, scattered and oppressed by the disorderly throng of friends and enemies, reminded their fearless sovereign that he was without armour, and conjured him to decline the fall of the impending ruin.

Are these words chosen by accident, and what impending ruin do they suppose? A footnote quotes Ammianus: *fugientium molem tanquam ruinam male compositi culminis*, which suggests only the confusion of action.

As they exclaimed, a cloud of darts and arrows was discharged from the flying squadrons; and a javelin, after razing the skin of his arm, transpierced the ribs, and fixed in the inferior part of the liver.⁵⁹

A javelin is normally a thrown weapon (Ammianus's words are: *incertum unde, subita equestris hasta*⁶⁰), and by making it part of a general Parthian discharge, Gibbon avoids the rather futile controversy about the spearman's identity.⁶¹ Julian is carried to his tent, where he dies that night after delivering a farewell address to his counsellors and commanders and discussing the immortality of the soul with Maximus and Priscus. Both discourses have aroused critical suspicion, though if Julian was capable of sustained speech while dying of progressive internal haemorrhaging, this is beyond doubt how he would have spoken, philosopher-emperor to the last.

Gibbon gives a full paraphrase of the farewell address, remarking that Julian clearly did not expect personal immortality but reunion with 'the substance of the universe'.⁶² He has already stated his view of Julian's personality and here says only:

In his last moments he displayed, perhaps with some ostentation, the love of virtue and of fame, which had been the ruling passions of his life,

a judgement already familiar, from which Gibbon proceeds without a break:

The triumph of Christianity, and the calamities of the empire, may, in some measure, be ascribed to Julian himself, who had neglected to secure the future execution of his designs by the timely and judicious nomination of an associate and successor.⁶³

⁵⁸ Gibbon follows both Ammianus and Libanius; the latter is anxious to have Julian fall in the moment of victory, and both present Shapur as anxious for peace.

⁵⁹ p. 943.

⁶⁰ Rolfe, 1939/1986, II, p. 492. A *hasta* is perhaps more likely to have been thrust than thrown.

⁶¹ Bowersock, 1978, pp. 116–17, pursues its course to modern times.

⁶² Womersley, 1994, I, p. 945 and n. 98. ⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 945–6.

Conventional readings of the *Decline and Fall* must fasten on the opening association of ideas; but the immediate meaning of ‘the triumph of Christianity’ is that Julian’s neo-pagan projects vanished at his death, while ‘the calamities of the empire’ occurred under his successors Jovian and Valens and do not have to be linked with the defeats preceding them. They are consequences of the lack of any regular mechanism of succession, and of the predicament of an army which must now choose an *imperator*; a predicament recurrent since the deaths of Nero and Commodus, to say nothing of Constantine’s.

(IV)

Unlike the dying Alexander, Julian does not leave his empire ‘to the strongest’, but (if the tale be true) to the choice of the army, abstaining from naming a choice of his own which ‘might be fatal to the person whom I should recommend’.⁶⁴ The succession must be decided by the soldiers, and that is its legitimacy; but the choice seems to rest on the commanders of his expeditionary force, now halted in an encampment increasingly besieged the longer it stays there. Julian’s had been a driving as well as a driven personality, and there remains speculation as to whether he could have – or his successor should have – forced it to keep marching until it, or a part of it, reached Roman territory. But the need to choose an emperor compelled a halt of several days, during which supplies were consumed and not replaced, and Shapur was able to exploit this situation by offering negotiations and then spinning them out. At this point there appears in Ammianus an *honoratior miles* – La Blérierie precedes Gibbon in suggesting that this was the historian himself⁶⁵ – who proposes that the generals should combine their energies to fight their way out, leaving the choice of an emperor until it can be made on Roman territory by the voices *utriusque exercitus*,⁶⁶ and so with greater legitimacy. But the longer the inevitable delay, the more certain it becomes that there must be a treaty and therefore an *imperator* – in mid-twentieth-century military parlance, somebody has to carry the can for this – and the task is imposed on the not very commanding figure of Jovian, chief of the *domestici* or imperial guards. Here we suddenly learn that the rumour of Julian’s investing

⁶⁴ Ammianus, 25, 3, 20 (Rolfe, 1939/1986, II, pp. 500–1); Womersley, 1994, I, p. 945.

⁶⁵ Ammianus, 25, 7, 8 (Rolfe, 1939/1986, II, pp. 532–3); La Blérierie, 1748, p. 176, n. (c); Womersley, 1994, I, p. 946, n. 100.

⁶⁶ Rolfe, 1939/1986, II, pp. 518–19, suggests that these words denote the western and eastern armies of the empire. La Blérierie, 1748, p. 5, translates them as ‘de concert avec l’armée d’observation’, which suggests the army led by Procopius and Sebastian. Gibbon (p. 947) seems if anything to support him.

Procopius with the purple was already current and effectual; Jovian is frightened into a treaty with Shapur by the suggestion that this *metuendum nomen* or 'dreaded name' may use the troops he commands, towards whom the army is marching, to bid for *res novae* (a new regime) of his own.⁶⁷ The generals consent to a thoroughly calamitous treaty, giving up five provinces of Mesopotamia – including the city of Nisibis for which Constantius had fought so hard – and conceding Persian hegemony over the kingdom of Armenia. After a disastrous march across a desert, they arrive at the Roman frontier, where they are cordially received (*benigne suscepti*) by none other than Procopius and Sebastian, who seem to have had no hostile intentions.⁶⁸ The rumour about Julian, however, continues to work on the unfortunate Procopius, who is glad to lay down the command that renders him suspect and escort Julian's body to a tomb in Tarsus; after which, says Ammianus, he goes to ground and, though diligently sought after, cannot be discovered for several years, until he suddenly appears in Constantinople, wearing a purple garment.⁶⁹ Gibbon will in due course⁷⁰ narrate this tragicomedy. It does not say much for imperial stability that the merest suspicion of intended rebellion could drive a man to a point where actual rebellion seemed the less dangerous course. This had, after all, been Julian's predicament at Lutetia.⁷¹

'This ignominious peace', says Gibbon,

has justly been considered as a memorable era in the decline and fall of the Roman empire. The predecessors of Jovian had sometimes relinquished the dominion of distant and unprofitable provinces; but, since the foundation of the city, the god Terminus, who guarded the boundaries of the republic, had never retired before the sword of a victorious enemy.⁷²

His language is unequivocal, yet leaves it uncertain just what is meant by 'decline and fall'. Other writers – Zosimus and Augustine – had presented Jovian's treaty in this light, but, Gibbon says in a footnote to this passage, 'this general position must be applied and interpreted with some caution'.⁷³ What troubled Ammianus was the thought that in the heroic age of the early

⁶⁷ Ammianus, 25, 7, 10 (Rolfe, 1939/1986, II, p. 534). Gibbon alludes fleetingly to this threat in the mind of Jovian; Womersley, 1994, I, p. 951.

⁶⁸ For the treaty in general, Womersley, 1994, I, p. 950. 'Benigne suscepti'; Ammianus, 25, 8, 16 (Rolfe, 1939/1986, II, p. 544).

⁶⁹ Ammianus, 25, 9 (Rolfe, 1939/1986, II, pp. 554–5): *confestim corpora sepulto discessit, nec inveniri usquam potuit, studio quaesitus ingenti, nisi quod multo postea apud Constantinopolim visus est subito, purpuratus*.

⁷⁰ DF, ch. 25; Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 969–72. Ammianus, 26, 6 through 9.

⁷¹ Above, p. 153. ⁷² Womersley, 1994, I, p. 956. Cf. Tillemont, *Empereurs*, IV, p. 238.

⁷³ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 956, n. 127.

republic, shameful capitulations like that of the Caudine Forks had been repudiated by the senate, whereas Jovian's was allowed to stand;⁷⁴ but, as Gibbon had written in his opening chapter, Terminus had 'submitted to the authority of the emperor Trajan'⁷⁵ when he conceded to the Parthians all territory beyond the Euphrates. Two conclusions were to be drawn. In the first place, there was now no senate – and, it might be added, no people – whose authority could override that of an Augustus if he chose to give away a province and surrender the majesty of Rome. Did this mean that there was now no *res publica*, no *virtus* capable of maintaining it? Gibbon is aware of this problem, but seems to dismiss it. He rejects as 'political metaphysics' La Bléterie's contention – important in the law of nations – that Jovian was not obliged to respect his own treaty because he had no authority to surrender a province without the consent of its people.⁷⁶ Having set out the merely interested motives of the emperor,⁷⁷ however, he continues:

After Jovian had performed these engagements which the voice of his people might have tempted him to violate, he hastened away from the scene of his disgrace, and proceeded with his whole court to enjoy the luxury of Antioch.⁷⁸

And Gibbon had made the same point by comparing the army's behaviour after the loss of Julian with that of Xenophon's Ten Thousand after the murder of their generals. Abandoned in the heart of Achaemenid Persia, they had constituted themselves a city on the march and fought their way to the sea.⁷⁹ At the deepest, almost subterranean, level of explanation of the Decline and Fall is always the thought that ancient virtue has become extinct. Implicit in Gibbon, it is explicit in La Bléterie:

que cette maxime précieuse échappée du naufrage de la république et des mœurs anciennes avait soutenu jusqu'à ce jour l'empire qu'elle avait formée: que puisqu'une fois on s'en était départi, on verroit désormais les empereurs céder successivement les provinces, démembrer l'état sous prétexte de le sauver: enfin qu'il était aisé de prévoir la chute et la ruine totale de cette vaste corps.⁸⁰

[that this invaluable maxim, which had survived the shipwreck of the republic and ancient values, had until this day maintained the empire it had formed; and that once it was disregarded, there would soon be seen emperors who successively yielded up provinces and dismembered the state under the pretence of saving it; from which it was easy to foresee the fall and ruin of the whole vast body.⁸¹]

⁷⁴ Ammianus, 25, 9, 11 (Rolfe, 1939/1986, II, p. 552). La Bléterie, 1748, pp. 63–5; Womersley, 1994, I, p. 954.

⁷⁵ *DF*, ch. 1 and n. 23; Womersley, 1994, I, p. 36.

⁷⁶ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 954, n. 123. See also p. 951, n. 113, where the threat of Procopius recurs.

⁷⁷ pp. 954–5. ⁷⁸ p. 956. ⁷⁹ pp. 951–2. ⁸⁰ La Bléterie, 1748, pp. 64–5.

⁸¹ Trans. JGAP.

On the other hand, Trajan had made a treaty, and so, however disgracefully, had Jovian (and so might Julian have, if he had accepted the initiatives of Shapur). Not only were these treaties sacrosanct and binding, even against ancient virtue; they declared that the competition for power between Romans and Persians, from Armenia to Assyria, was a competition between empires, conducted (however brutally) by war and diplomacy in interaction, like the wars of eighteenth-century Europe replacing feudal anarchy and the wars of religion. It followed that for neither empire was defeat, however damaging, a Decline and Fall in the western sense: a disintegration of the empire and its capacity to control barbarian settlement. As had been recognised since Flavio Biondo in the fifteenth century,⁸² there had been no Decline and Fall of the eastern empire until at earliest the seventh century, when the Roman empire partially, and the Persian wholly, had collapsed before the Muslim Arabs; and even that had been a collapse before enthusiasm rather than barbarism, and perhaps did not need the explanation in terms of systemic decay Gibbon was constructing for western Rome. To associate Jovian and Julian before him with 'the decline and fall of the Roman empire' was rhetorically satisfying, but not historical narrative. That narrative had now to be resumed.

⁸² *FDF*, pp. 194–7.

Part IV

Barbarism: The First Catastrophe

12 Valentinian I and Valens: the turn to the west

(I)

Gibbon concluded volume II of the *Decline and Fall* at the moment where Ammianus Marcellinus had ended his history. Having left the army and settled in Rome under circumstances of which not much is known,¹ Ammianus – who had been a spectator but not an actor in the reigns succeeding Julian's – chose to recount nothing of the reign of Theodosius under whom he was living, much as Tacitus had chosen to write nothing of that of Nerva. Gibbon here found himself deprived of the last classical historian he could respect as such and take as his guide and master, as he so completely if critically had in his last chapter on Julian; he was very well aware of this lack in the climactic chapters which were to follow. Ammianus, however, had narrated the reigns of Jovian, Valentinian I and Valens, through the disastrous defeat of the last at the battle of Adrianople in 378 – after which, historians agreed, the empire was never the same again – but did not relate, though he witnessed, the appointment of Theodosius as eastern (and later sole) Augustus with the mission of saving what could be saved. Gibbon said farewell to Ammianus at this point and here terminated his second volume. Since he published the second and third together, we must be wary of over-interpreting this authorial decision. It is noteworthy, however, that Ammianus still thinks of Rome as eternal; the gods remain in power, and Rome may recover from this second Cannae as it did from the first;² whereas Gibbon knows that Theodosius will destroy the old religion, and that under his sons there will occur the disintegration of the empire in the west which is what is meant by *Decline and Fall*. 'The triumph of barbarism and religion' will have decisively advanced, though it is still centuries away from an undated completion, by the end of volume III.

There will not again be a history like Julian's, or indeed like that of the Constantinian dynasty of which he was the last descendant; and there

¹ Matthews, 1989, ch II. ² *Ibid.*, pp. 470–2.

begin to be changes in the narratives Gibbon relates, their sources and the conventions by which they are to be related. At Jovian's premature death by accident, the armies must meet and choose again, and Gibbon makes us aware of a determination that the choice shall not lead to civil war, so strong as almost to defeat itself by designating the scapegoat who may disturb it. The generals rapidly select the well-qualified Pannonian Valentinian, but when he appears to receive acclamation the soldiers clamour (why?) for the instant choice of a co-emperor. He sternly replies that the decision is now his and not theirs, but no one is surprised when he designates his brother Valens, whose signal lack of distinction ensures that he will have no ambitions of his own. What is more surprising – though this is not discussed by Ammianus, Gibbon or Tillemont (who is now re-emerging among Gibbon's primary authorities) – is that Valentinian reserves to himself the western provinces, leaving his unremarkable brother to handle the consequences of Julian's Persian campaign and the continuation of ecclesiastical conflict. There could be no clearer demonstration that Jovian's surrender of Mesopotamia, though a defeat and a disaster, presented no threat to the structure or survival of empire in the east. Shapur/Sapor is content to pick up his major gain, the domination of Armenia,³ and the conflict remains one between rival empires. The chief problem confronting Valens is the tragic absurdity of the rebellion of Procopius, who assumes the purple for no better reason than that everyone assumes he has no choice. For a short period he controls Constantinople itself – that city is not yet the indispensable key to power it began to be in Gibbon's opening chapters – and some armies in Thrace and western Asia declare for him because they lack other leadership; but Valens's generals put him down by the exercise of their own energies, and Valentinian is not called on to come to his brother's aid from the west.⁴ The co-existence of Augusti is not more than a feature of the joint reign Gibbon proceeds to describe.

(II)

Chapter 25 is a mosaic of themes and narratives, like so much in the *Decline and Fall*, through which we must follow Gibbon as he moves from one set of sources and authorities to another, and so from one to another set of

³ This does not appear in Gibbon's narrative until late in the long chapter 25; see below, pp. 247–49, and Womersley, 1994, I, p. 1008. 'The hostile measures of the Persians' oblige Valens to station himself in Syria (p. 970) and the rebellion of Procopius in western Asia and Thrace occurs without his presence.

⁴ For the narrative of this rebellion see Ammianus, 25, 5, 8 to 9–11 (Rolfe, 1939/1986, II, pp. 592–639) and Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 969–73.

conventions for the writing of history. Ammianus Marcellinus is still, if nearly for the last time, the master narrator, but he shows his actors (chiefly the emperors) engaging in more than one kind of action, and is not altogether the prisoner of the rhetorical conventions that infuriate Gibbon⁵ even though he admires him. He has two concurrent reigns to recount, and they do not form a single narrative. Early modern historians – Tillemont and Howel – deal with Valentinian and Valens separately, and have recourse to an annalistic structure which Ammianus does not adopt. Though this could be related by following the consular *fasti*, they are aided in using it by the Codex Theodosianus's dating of the several laws and decrees issued by emperors;⁶ but legislation is not a necessary feature of the narrative in classical rhetoric. Ammianus deals with it, as he does with actions affecting the church, as these fall in his way; in consequence, he acknowledges that he must relate a number of narratives that are concurrent but not simultaneous, constantly leaving one to return to another at the moment at which he has left it.⁷ There is in Ammianus – as perhaps there is at bottom in all historians – a mosaic of narratives and with them digressions; but it is a question whether these constitute in his mind a mosaic of themes constituting the history of a society, culture or empire. For Gibbon they are nearer doing so, in consequence of the historian he is. Valentinian and Valens engage in legislation and deal with problems arising in the church; Ammianus knows this and has things to say about both; but he does not have access, as Gibbon has, to the Codex Theodosianus for the former or to Sozomen and Theodoret for the latter. These are ancient sources, but have been the subject of early modern historical and ecclesiastical scholarship. In its own right as the historical document Gibbon found it to be,⁸ the Codex has taken part in the transformation of historiography; and Jacques Godefroy its editor has also been editor of Philostorgius and Libanius, works that bring him close to Tillemont, as much Gibbon's guide in early modern ecclesiastical history as Ammianus in late antique rhetorical narrative. We have to follow Gibbon through their styles of historiography as we trace his pursuit of the themes that interest him, and it is a question how far the latter as well as the former are dictated to him by the historians he must follow as well as by his historical interests, the product of his own time. At and after the end of chapter 25, however, something happens to change this picture of Gibbon as late humanist; he

⁵ For his strictures on Ammianus's style, see Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 687, n. 16; 849, n. 42; 966, n. 24; 1021, n. 154; 1023, n. 1; 1056, n. 81; 1063, n. 91.

⁶ For Gibbon's use of the Codex for these reigns, see Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 978–9, nn. 60–2.

⁷ Ammianus 26, 5, 15 (Rolfe, 1939/1986, II, pp. 595–6). ⁸ Above, p. 25.

moves into the history of barbarian peoples, and beyond that into the history that will be shaped by barbarian and Roman interactions after the dissolution of the western empire; the point reached by the end of his third volume, but a point beyond which he is beginning to look.

The differentiation of Roman empire into a Latin west and a Greek east was of course fundamental to the whole of Gibbon's historical thinking. Decline and Fall itself was a western concept, and it was already a question whether any history but that of a post-Roman and Latin Europe could or need be written. Gibbon had already shown a proleptic interest in any administrative separation between west and east, whether by Diocletian's tetrarchs, the foundation of Constantinople, the sons of Constantine, or the indifference of a Latin-speaking clergy to the disputes of Greek theologians; he had used language indicating that such distinctions presaged the climax of his narrative.⁹ The division of authority between Valentinian and Valens might be seen in such a light, the more so since it was striking, after the ill-fated Persian wars of Constantius and Julian, that Valentinian as senior partner chose to rule in the west, possibly indicating that the European frontiers were more in need of attention than the Persian, even after Julian and Jovian. When, however, Gibbon describes the parting of the brothers near Naissus as 'the solemn and final division of the Roman empire',¹⁰ we may wish to read less into these words than Gibbon possibly put there. The reign of Valentinian in the west is to be on the whole successful, and the catastrophe of Valens at Adrianople is two chapters and fourteen years away. It is only at the succession of Theodosius by his sons that Gibbon will pronounce division and decline irreversible,¹¹ and the historical conditions obtaining then are not apparent in chapter 25. What the Pannonian brothers are doing in 364 is the normal and successful management of an elective succession by an army which knows what it is doing, and the wretched Procopius will not disturb it for long.

Once he is eliminated, however, things begin to happen which strongly suggest insecurity and consequent tyranny in both emperors. At Rome and at Antioch – Valens's seat rather than Constantinople – there develop simultaneous witch-hunts directed against magic and magicians, which in the usual way get out of hand so that inoffensive people suffer prosecution, torture and death.¹² Here it may for once be possible to charge Gibbon with anachronistic thinking. Since Julian's counsellor Maximus is one of

⁹ See the supposed contrasts between a martial west and an effeminate east (above, pp. 27, 52, 55) and between Latin simplicity and Greek theology (pp. 112, 124–25).

¹⁰ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 968.

¹¹ Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 98–9, 112. Below, pp. 311, 338.

¹² Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 973, 975.

those executed,¹³ the suspicion may arise that what is going on is a purge of the networks of Iamblichan philosophers on whom Julian had hoped to build a post-Christian priesthood; and this does seem to have been the view of Tillemont, who after mentioning 'l'ouvrage et le crime des philosophes payens', continues:

Ce fut aussi sur eux que elle [i.e. the persecution] retomba principalement, et ils furent presque tous executez . . . On voit qu'ils estoient tous, ou presque tous magiciens, comme Saint-Augustin le remarque aussi des Platoniciens de son temps

and as Tillemont himself had declared of Plotinus.¹⁴ It was significant even if fabulous that Iamblichus (long dead) was reported to have taken poison about this time.

La persecution fut si violente contre les philosophes que les autres memes n'oserent porter leur habit, de peur qu'on ne les accusent de se mesler de deviner et de faire des ceremonies magiques.¹⁵

[It was on them too that persecution fell, and nearly all of them were executed. . . . We know that they were all or nearly all magicians, just as St Augustine observes of the Platonists of his own time . . . The persecution was so violent against these philosophers that others dared not wear their cloaks, for fear of being accused of meddling with divination and conducting magical rituals.¹⁶]

There is a distinction here between theurgy, the marriage between magic and philosophy of which Julian had hoped and Gibbon had written so much, and goety, the vulgar sorcery and fortune-telling that underlay all cultic religion. Gibbon mentions the difference in a footnote, but adds that neither can stand up to the acute criticism of Bayle;¹⁷ and his treatment of the episode is entirely governed by the self-congratulation of Enlightenment at having terminated the belief in and persecution of witches in Christian society.¹⁸ The cases in the fourth century of which he tells us are nearly all goetic, and consist largely of the imprudence of using ouija-boards to indicate the name of the next emperor. For all the efforts of the armies to control the choice of emperors, the succession is indeterminate and the successors insecure. Insecurity in the monarch is a principal cause of tyranny, the classic portrait of which emerges as Gibbon, following his authorities, tells us that the behaviour of Valens was governed by fear and that of Valentinian by anger.¹⁹ There are gruesome accounts of the latter ordering servants to be executed for no

¹³ p. 976, n. 52. ¹⁴ *RFT*, p. 75. ¹⁵ Tillemont, *Empereurs*, v, pp. 48–9.

¹⁶ Trans. JGAP. Gibbon says that when Jovian and the army returned from Persia, philosophers found it prudent to shave their beards (Womersley, 1994, I, p. 961).

¹⁷ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 974, n. 46. ¹⁸ pp. 974–5. ¹⁹ p. 976.

reason, or thrown to man-killing bears kept caged in his household. But this is the tyranny of the palace, in Roman literature not incompatible with wise and beneficent government in the provinces. 'It is not from the master of Innocence' – the name of one of the bears –

that we should expect the tender regard for the welfare of his subjects which prompted Valentinian to condemn the exposition of new-born infants, and to establish fourteen skilful physicians, with stipends and privileges, in the fourteen quarters of Rome. The good sense of an illiterate soldier founded an useful and liberal institution for the education of youth, and the support of declining science.²⁰

It was still the practice of rhetorical history to tabulate the prince's good and bad qualities in opposed treatments, and Gibbon goes on, almost without a break,²¹ from the horrors of the witch-hunt to praise the 'dispassionate judgment' of Valentinian and the 'equal docility'²² with which Valens obeyed the example of his brother and the wise advice of his counsellors. As predictably in late antique histories as in early modern, rulers are tyrants imprisoned by their passions when isolated from their counsellors, princes when they accept their counsel. Ammianus (though not Gibbon) describes anger as a disease of the soul,²³ which becomes incurable when counsel is lacking or disregarded. In Gibbon's case, however, the rhetoric is reinforced by philology; the admirable legislation of Valentinian is reported from the *Codex Theodosianus*, the commentaries of Godefroy, and – with a leap into enlightened modernity – Giannone's *Istoria Civile del Regno di Napoli*, where the emperor appears patron of both laws and letters, establishing 'the first outlines of the form and discipline of a modern university'.²⁴ Without abandoning rhetorical antitheses, or asking as we should whether it is plausible that the same personality could exemplify tyranny in one setting and liberal benevolence in another, Gibbon is employing late-antique jurisprudence and early modern legal humanism to present historical actions which look beyond Decline and Fall into neo-classical civility. More immediately, and closer to the narrative of imperial collapse and its causes, he tells us that Valens in the east was anxious to lessen the burden of taxation, and that if Valentinian in the west kept it at a high level, it was

²⁰ p. 978.

²¹ There is, however, a notable passage at this point (p. 976), at which Gibbon makes the observation that the 'sensations of terror, of admiration, and of pity' we feel in reading Tacitus's 'contrast of freedom and servitude, of recent greatness and of actual misery' do not apply to late antiquity, so that sentimental history (as Adam Smith had described it) is here out of place. The anatomy of tyranny ensues.

²² p. 978. ²³ Ammianus, 27, 7, 9 (Rolfe, 1939/1986, III, pp. 50–1). ²⁴ p. 979.

much more advantageously employed for the defence and improvement of the state. The subjects of the East, who enjoyed the present benefit, applauded the indulgence of their prince. The solid, but less splendid, merit of Valentinian was felt and acknowledged by the subsequent generation.²⁵

If this is encomium, we are also being told that it was the west that needed defence; and it may be hinted also that the cause of its subsequent catastrophe lay in the east. Gibbon now moves on to history in another dimension.

(III)

In this chapter, unlike those which dealt with Constantine, Constantius and Julian, the history of the church, instead of posing problems which necessitate separate treatment, is included in that of imperial policy and constitutes one of its themes. It does not transform the exercise of empire, nor is it transformed by the conflict with the latter. Gibbon's encomium on the western emperor continues:

the most honourable circumstance of the character of Valentinian is the firm and temperate impartiality which he uniformly preserved in an age of religious contention. His strong sense, unenlightened, but uncorrupted, by study, declined, with respectful indifference, the subtle questions of theological debate. The government of the *Earth* claimed his vigilance, and satisfied his ambition; while he remembered that he was the disciple of the church, he never forgot that he was the sovereign of the clergy. Under the reign of an apostate, he had signalled his zeal for the honour of Christianity –

no more than its honour? could he neglect its claim to truth? –

he allowed to his subjects the privilege he had assumed for himself; and they might accept with gratitude and confidence the general toleration which was granted by a prince addicted to passion, but incapable of fear or disguise.²⁶

A footnote goes so far as to speak of Valentinian's 'rational toleration'.²⁷ Once again, we are in the presence of an Enlightenment conviction that toleration is not merely the supreme merit of civil government, but one of the chief ends for which it exists, so that perhaps they cannot exist separately; and we look again at the possibilities that toleration requires indifference to disputes which cannot be resolved, and that the function of reason is to encourage the intellect to maintain that indifference. Valentinian clearly does not care about the definitions of Christ which compete for his attention, and the question left unanswered is whether his

²⁵ p. 980. ²⁶ *Ibid.* Gibbon's emphasis. ²⁷ *Ibid.*, n. 65.

Christian beliefs are simple, formal or non-existent. It is a further question how far we may read into Gibbon intimations he did not convey in writing.

For Tillemont – who now resumes his place alongside Ammianus as Gibbon's guide in ecclesiastical history – what mattered was that Valentinian's refusal to settle theological disputes or their consequences left such matters in the hands of western and Latin bishops who allowed Arianism no foothold (except Milan). Gibbon's praise of toleration bypasses the Christological controversy. He tells us instead that though magic was condemned with a ferocity more tyrannous than judicial, Valentinian

immediately admitted the petition of Praetextatus, proconsul of Achaia, who represented that the life of the Greeks would become dreary and comfortless if they were deprived of the invaluable blessing of the Eleusian mysteries

which had made an enthusiast and fanatic of Julian. Without saying so Gibbon continues:

Philosophy alone can boast (and perhaps it is no more than the boast of philosophy) that her gentle hand is able to eradicate from the human mind the latent and deadly principle of fanaticism. But this truce of twelve years, which was enforced by the wise and vigorous government of Valentinian, by suspending the repetition of mutual injuries, contributed to soften the manners, and abate the prejudices, of the religious factions.²⁸

Perhaps this is not one of Gibbon's clearest passages. The test of toleration has now become the survival of paganism, and that not the soul-transforming mysteries of death and rebirth, but the sober rituals of civil society – incapable, as Warburton and others had argued, of generating belief or intolerance.²⁹ At the close of the passage just quoted, Gibbon returns to the intolerance and fanaticism that flowed from the need to define Christ; and we need to enquire what 'philosophy' existed in the late antique world capable of laying a gentle hand upon that. Gibbon knew very well that, if not the cultivated scepticism of Cicero, this must be the radical materialism of Lucretius; but it is hard to find him saying so here. He reverts to the growing gap between west and east.

The friend of toleration was unhappily placed at a distance from the scene of the fiercest controversies. As soon as the Christians of the West had extricated themselves from the snares of the creed of Rimini, they happily relapsed into the slumber of orthodoxy; and the small remains of the Arian party, that still existed at Sirmium or Milan, might be considered rather as objects of contempt than resentment.³⁰

²⁸ p. 981. ²⁹ *RFT*, pp. 233, 343–7. ³⁰ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 981.

This is not quite how Gibbon had told the story previously. Certainly it had been the lack of intellectual sophistication that went with the use of the Latin language that had restrained the western bishops from departing from the Nicene confession; but this had made them the allies of Athanasius, for whom the Trinity was an object of intellectual passion, and of the western bishops Lucifer of Cagliari and Hilary of Poitiers, whose orthodoxy was anything but slumberous. Gibbon may be slipping into a conventional anti-clericalism, in which the clergy are mildly ridiculous when they are not fiercely persecuting; or he may have in mind that the orthodoxy whose freedom the western bishops had defended against Constantius and his ministers was upheld by the authority of the bishops of Rome.³¹ Valentinian's toleration was possible because his authority was unchallenged, and the popes of his time were not challengers to it. In the still bitterly divided east, Valens was faced not by rival authority but by endemic disorder:

from the Euxine to the extremity of Thebais, the strength and numbers of the hostile factions were more equally balanced; and this equality, instead of recommending the counsels of peace, served only to perpetuate the horrors of religious war.³²

Perhaps 'war' is a strong term, as armies are not to be found fighting one another; but the great cities of the east are plagued by massive communal conflicts, religious and doctrinal, led by demagogue bishops and controllable only by sending in troops who inflict mass casualties. What concerns Gibbon, as it has concerned every emperor since Constantine, is that it is hard for the Augustus to avoid taking sides, as even the tolerant but choleric Valentinian might have found himself doing had he reigned in the east; and once he does so he will be called a persecutor and may very well become one. Valens, with a Gothic war on his hands, thinks it would be wise to accept baptism, and naturally turns to the bishop of Constantinople. In Gibbon's account, he is scarcely aware that this prelate is a leading Arian; 'his misfortune, rather than his guilt, was the inevitable consequence of his erroneous choice';³³ but in Tillemont's, guilt lies at the door of the emperor's Arian wife, who is said to have played the role of Eve to her husband's Adam.³⁴ To Tillemont heresy mattered, and the rule of a heretic amounted to persecution; Gibbon recognises this, and remarks that

whatever had been the determination of the emperor, he must have offended a numerous party of his Christian subjects; as the leaders both of the Homoiousians and of the Arians believed that, if they were not suffered to reign, they were most

³¹ Above, pp. 124, 134–36. ³² Womersley, 1994, I, p. 981. ³³ p. 982.

³⁴ *Mémoires*, VI, p. 532.

cruelly injured and oppressed. After he had taken this decisive step, it was extremely difficult for him to preserve either the virtue, or the reputation of impartiality.

Consequences followed for the emperor's own personality.

He never aspired, like Constantius, to the fame of a profound theologian; but . . . resigned his conscience to the direction of his ecclesiastical guides, and promoted by the influence of his authority the re-union of the *Athanasian heretics* to the body of the Catholic Church. At first he pitied their blindness; by degrees he was provoked at their obstinacy; and he insensibly hated those sectarians to whom he was an object of hatred.³⁵

This is of course exactly the language which Gibbon had used of Constantius and of Constantine before him,³⁶ and not far from that used of Julian; it is what happens to rulers not protected by the slumberous orthodoxy of the Latin language. The parallel with Constantius continues.

The feeble mind of Valens was always swayed by the persons with whom he familiarly conversed; and the exile or imprisonment of a private citizen are the favours the most readily granted in a despotic court.³⁷

For all this, Valens is not a persecutor as Gibbon understands the term. Recent scholarship ascribes to him a policy of return to the Arian establishment intended by Constantius, and of securing a general subscription to the formula of Rimini;³⁸ but of this Gibbon says no more than

In every election the claims of the Arian candidate obtained the preference; and if they were opposed by the majority of the people, he was usually supported by the authority of the civil magistrate, or even by the terrors of military force.³⁹

To the Nicene party, and to Catholic historians, this is indeed persecution, and Tillemont, following Baronius, collects every instance that can be found of the sufferings of the orthodox to justify the generalisation of a 'persecution de Valens'.⁴⁰ But the reader of Tillemont cannot be unaware that the meaning of the term is changing. It is persecution without martyrs; no one has the opportunity to confess his faith at the price of public execution, and Tillemont had wondered in his earlier volumes how the church would maintain its mission when deprived of the seed of blood.⁴¹ Julian's strategy had been to avoid making martyrs while employing civil persecution to bring Christians back to paganism, and Tillemont points up the parallel with Valens in a long citation of Gregory Nazianzen.

³⁵ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 982. Gibbon's emphasis. ³⁶ Above, pp. 83, 106, 127.

³⁷ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 982. ³⁸ McGuckin, 2001, p. 181.

³⁹ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 982. ⁴⁰ *Mémoires*, VI, pp. 558–9 *et seq.*

⁴¹ *RFT*, pp. 61–2, 69, 83–6.

Valens, dit-il, fut un persecuteur qui n'eut plus d'humanité que Julien, ou plutost il le surpassoit d'autant plus de cruauté, que c'estoit un faux Christ qui portoit le nom de JESUS CHRIST. Il fut la honte et l'infamie des Chretiens, qui ne pourvoit luy obéir sans impiété, ni acquerir la gloire en souffrant sous luy. Car il ne paroissoit faire aucune injustice en punissant ceux qui ne luy estoient pas soumis; et l'on ne donnoit point le glorieux titre de martyr aux tourmens qu'il leur faisoit endurer : de sorte qu'il sembloit avoir trouvé le moyen d faire croire qu'ils estoient punis comme des impiés, lors qu'ils souffroient en qualité de Chretiens.⁴²

[Valens, he says, was a persecutor who had no more humanity than Julian, or rather he surpassed him in cruelty inasmuch as his was a false Christ who bore the name of Jesus. He brought shame and infamy upon Christians who could neither obey him without impiety nor obtain glory in suffering under him. For he seemed to commit no injustice in punishing those who did not submit to him, and the glorious name of martyrdom was not accorded to the torments he made them suffer; so that he seemed to have found the means of making it believed that they were being punished for impiety when they suffered as Christians.]

The vocabulary of persecution and martyrdom was hard to apply, though Tillemont passionately believed in it, when a Christian emperor used his power in a dispute between believing Christians. Gibbon cannot deny that Valens was employing systematic intolerance in failing to apply the indifference of his brother, who did not have theological disputes on his hands. All he can do is minimise the extent of persecution – failing perhaps to see the paradox that it was its mildness that made it dangerous – and point to the emperor's friendly dealings with Basil of Caesarea, who was upholding the Trinitarian cause in Cappadocia and had no desire to challenge the imperial authority.⁴³ A separate issue, which perhaps cuts deeper into the problems of religion and civil power, is said to have arisen when Valens in an edict

observed that several of his subjects, gratifying their lazy disposition under the pretence of religion, had associated themselves with the monks of Egypt; and he directed the court of the East to drag them from their solitude, and to compel those deserters of society to accept the fair alternative of renouncing their temporal possessions, or of discharging the public duties of men and citizens.⁴⁴

It is the kind of thing Julian might have said; but he did not send a military expedition into the desert, or attempt to conscript young monks into the armies.⁴⁵ Gibbon remarks in a footnote: 'Hereafter I shall

⁴² *Mémoires*, vi, p. 558. 'Impiété' and 'impiés' employ the term at different levels of meaning.

⁴³ Womersley, 1994, i, pp. 983–4. Note the argument that Valentinian does not remark on any persecution by Valens, and that 'the judicious historian' (not clearly identified), who has praised Valentinian's tolerance, draws no contrast with Valens.

⁴⁴ p. 985. ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

consider the monastic institutions',⁴⁶ and when he does, towards the end of his third volume, his denunciation of monks as deserters of society will know no bounds. Yet these are the Egyptian solitaries who protected Athanasius against Constantius, and served freedom by doing so. Gibbon has a problem before him, of which he is not unaware, but which he will seldom acknowledge when monks are in question.

The concluding sections of that part of chapter 25 which deal with matters of religion return us to a west which can hardly be said to be in a state of slumber. They open, as they conclude, with words clearly showing that Gibbon had modern Europe in mind.

The strict regulations which have been framed by the wisdom of modern legislators to restrain the wealth and avarice of the clergy may be originally deduced from the example of the emperor Valentinian.⁴⁷

He issues an edict – issued by Valentinian 'as the guardian of domestic happiness and virtue' – forbidding 'the ecclesiastics and monks' (note the all-inclusive definite article) to 'frequent the houses of widows and virgins', and annulling all testaments by the two latter that leave wealth of any kind to the former. It is evidently the case that this had grown to be a recognised social problem; but with Gibbon we are in the presence of a long-standing Protestant and freethinking invective against the cunning and hypocrisy of the clergy, and the sentimental and often sexual dependence into which women were expected to fall upon their spiritual directors. He holds forth on this subject at some length,⁴⁸ and his language is recognisable and familiar. It is a temptation to suggest that he had in mind his aunt Hester and her spiritual director William Law, but the forbidding respectability of both stood in his way, and the lushness of his language suggests a more uninhibited literature of anti-clericalism. Monks, needless to say, are prominent in his portrayal; even Jerome, writing in the next century that he was grieved not by this law but by the fact that 'we have deserved it (*meruerimus*)', is accused by 'his brother monks' of the abuses he denounced in them.⁴⁹ All this is as frankly recorded by Tillemont as it is by Gibbon, but their invectives have different targets, as is clear when both historians remark that the law forbade bequests to individual clerics, but permitted those to churches in their corporate capacity, 'à laquelle', says Tillemont following Godefroy, 'il estoit toujours libre de donner'.⁵⁰ Gibbon has another emphasis,

Jerome, or Ambrose, might patiently acquiesce in the justice of an ineffectual or salutary law. If the ecclesiastics were checked in the pursuit of personal

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, n. 75. ⁴⁷ p. 985. ⁴⁸ pp. 985–6. ⁴⁹ p. 986, nn. 78, 79.

⁵⁰ *Mémoires*, VIII, pp. 396–8.

emolument, they would exert a more laudable industry to increase the wealth of the church; and dignify their covetousness with the specious names of piety and patriotism ... Jerome discreetly insinuates the secret policy of his patron Damasus.⁵¹

It is against this that modern legislators have exercised their wisdom. Is Gibbon writing solely as a modern, or does he wish to indicate that the wealth of the church weakened the empire? He does not, and Tillemont would not, say so. The issue deepens with the concluding episode: a violently contested election to the bishopric of Rome between Damasus, Jerome's patron and 'Saint Damasus' to Tillemont, and his rival Ursinus, in which Ammianus reports that Damasus led an armed mob that left a hundred and thirty-seven dead in one of Rome's principal basilicas.⁵² Conflicts of this kind have occurred before in the great cities of west and east, and Valentinian is not mentioned as having acted to control this one. To Gibbon of course it is a theme already familiar: when other-worldly values are not extra-social, they are corrupted by society and serve to corrupt it; but whether this ranks as a cause of Decline and Fall is not considered in this chapter. Tillemont follows Jerome in exculpating Damasus,⁵³ that 'very ambiguous character' according to Gibbon,⁵⁴ but both historians concur, not only in fully repeating Ammianus's account of the conflict, but in supplying full French⁵⁵ and English translations (in Gibbon's case free though not distorting) of his digression on the extraordinary wealth and power accruing to the bishops of Rome. They include the story that Praetextatus, a polite pagan and respected magistrate, assured Damasus (with whom he appears on familiar terms) that he would gladly become a Christian if he could be assured of the bishopric. In Gibbon's text this seems an example of his irony;⁵⁶ but Tillemont must have had other motives – Jansenist in character? – in following Ammianus through the massacre in the basilica, the jest of Praetextatus, and the lengthy digression in which the ancient historian (Gibbon here calls him 'the honest Pagan') describes the display and luxury of the Roman bishop and goes so far towards Christian values as to prefer the unostentatious frugality to be found in provincial bishops. Tillemont and Gibbon are telling the story and following the commentary for non-identical

⁵¹ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 986.

⁵² Ammianus's account occurs at 27, 3, 11–13 (Rolfe, 1939/1986, III, pp. 18–21). For Gibbon's version of the whole passage, see Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 987–8; his English is worth comparing with the Latin.

⁵³ *Mémoires*, VIII, p. 390. He ranks as a saint, and Tillemont devotes a chapter to him under that heading.

⁵⁴ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 986.

⁵⁵ *Mémoires*, VIII, pp. 390–1.

⁵⁶ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 988.

reasons,⁵⁷ while Ammianus may be read as engaging in one of several digressions on the fantastic pride and irresponsibility of both patricians and *proletarii* in the corn-fed megalopolis in which he had settled to write his history – a culture astonishing to the eyes even of an Antiochene, as Ammianus was by birth. We shall hear more of these digressions.

Gibbon concludes his account of ecclesiastic history under the Pannonian brothers:

This lively picture of the wealth and luxury of the popes in the fourth century becomes the more curious as it represents the intermediate degree between the humble poverty of the apostolic fisherman and the royal state of a temporal prince whose dominions extend from the confines of Naples to the banks of the Po.⁵⁸

Giannone's voice is of course audible, but so are those of any Protestant historian and not a few Catholics. In Gibbon's own case, we are at a moment in 'the triumph of barbarism and religion', since the rise of the popes to temporal power is a key to the latter. But to Ammianus the bishops of Rome are not 'popes' since the word is unknown to him. It is crucial to both Tillemont and Gibbon, but 'the apostolic fisherman' is one of Gibbon's few allusions to the Petrine supremacy. Papal luxury, furthermore, is on the increase in the fabulously wealthy if economically insecure city of the late empire, whereas the papal supremacy and the temporal power will be achieved in the depopulated ruins left behind by the barbarian invasions, which it took the popes centuries to restore to the condition in which Gibbon saw the city in 1764. The history of those invasions – if that is the right word – may or may not have begun in the days of Valens and Valentinian.

(IV)

In the concluding sections of chapter 25, Gibbon's themes, and historical horizons, are suddenly enlarged in some unexpected directions. The starting point is Valentinian's decision to take the western provinces to himself. We can only speculate on Gibbon's reasons, though perhaps not Ammianus's, for what seems to us a failure to remark on a decision that calls for explanation; but insofar as either historian offers one, it seems to be that barbarian breaches of the western frontiers called for Valentinian's attention with an urgency that neither Shapur nor Procopius could equal

⁵⁷ 'Baronius soutient que Damase estoit innocent de ce luxe . . . mais quoy qu'il en soit, le passage d'Ammien est excellent pour montre . . . l'estime, qu'elle leur est commandée par l'Evangile, par les Canons, et par l'exemple des Saints' (*Mémoires* pp. 390–1).

⁵⁸ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 988.

in the east. Ammianus brings east and west together in a single package, but in language which clearly sets Persians apart from barbarians.

Hoc tempore velut per universum orbem Romanum, bellicum canentibus bucinis, excitae gentes saevissimae, limites sibi proximos persultabat. Gallias Raetiasque simul Alamanni populabantur; Sarmatae Pannonias et Quadi; Picti, Saxonesque et Scotti, et Attacotti Britannos aerumnis vexavere continuis; Austoriani Mauricaeque aliae gentes, Africam solito acrius incursabant; Thracias et Pannonias diripiebant praedatorii globi Gothorum. Persarum rex manus Armeniis inieciabat, eos in suam ex integro vocare vi nimia properans, sed iniuste causando, quod post Ioviani excessum, cum quo foedera firmarat et pacem, nihil ob stare debet, quo minus ea recuperaret, quae antea ad maiores suos pertinuisse monstrabat.⁵⁹

[At this time, as if trumpets were sounding the war-note throughout the whole Roman world, the most savage peoples roused themselves and poured across the nearest frontiers. At the same time the Alamanni were devastating Gaul and Raetia, the Sarmatae and Quadi Pannonia, while the Picts, Saxons, Scots and Attacotti were harassing the Britons with constant disasters. The Austoriani and other Moorish tribes raided Africa more fiercely than ever, and predatory bands of Goths were plundering Thrace and Pannonia. The king of the Persians was laying hands on Armenia, hastening with mighty efforts to bring that country again under his sway, under the false pretext that after the death of Jovian, with whom he had concluded a treaty of peace, nothing ought to prevent his recovery of what he claimed had formerly belonged to his forefathers.⁶⁰]

Ammianus says that Valentinian's first instinct was to deal with Procopius himself, but that his advisers and western emergencies persuaded him that the Alamanni in Gaul threatened the empire, whereas Procopius threatened only him and his brother.⁶¹ We have to bear in mind that all historians from Zosimus to Gibbon wrote in the knowledge that a collapse of Roman authority in the west had occurred, whereas Ammianus, writing under Theodosius, could still look for the empire's recovery from the disaster of Adrianople. It was open and perhaps inevitable for Gibbon to see the simultaneous frontier crises facing Valentinian as indicating the approaching Decline and Fall; but this was balanced by his strong impulse to present that emperor's reign as benign and successful, not only because it had escaped theological controversy. Perhaps this is why he at least does not see Valentinian's choice of the west as particularly problematic. It is only after dealing with both emperors as half tyrants and half legislators, the one successful and the other less so in exercising civil government in a world intruded on by the church, that he turns to the barbarian frontiers and like Ammianus offers to deal with them in a single package.

⁵⁹ Ammianus, 26, 4, 5–6. ⁶⁰ Rolfe, 1939/1986, III, pp. 586–9 (Latin and English).

⁶¹ Ammianus, 26, 5, 13 (Rolfe, 1939/1986, III, pp. 594–5).

As soon as the death of Julian had relieved the barbarians from the terror of his name –

Gibbon is echoing Ammianus and Zosimus,⁶² but is it more than rhetoric?

the most sanguine hopes of rapine and conquest excited the nations of the East, of the North, and of the South. Their inroads were often vexatious, and sometimes formidable; but, during the twelve years of the reign of Valentinian, his firmness and vigilance protected his own dominions; and his powerful genius seemed to inspire and direct the feeble counsels of his brother. Perhaps the method of annals would more forcibly express the urgent and divided cares of the two emperors; but the attention of the reader, likewise, would be distracted by a tedious and unnecessary narrative. A separate view of the five great theatres of war: I. Germany; II. Britain; III. Africa; IV. The East; and V. The Danube; will express a more distinct image of the military state of the empire under the reign of Valentinian and Valens.⁶³

There is only the faintest hint that after Valentinian's death, the reign of Valens will end in a disaster in the east from which the west will not recover; and the frontier wars of Valentinian, and even Valens while his brother lives, are to be narrated as normal occurrences in the relations of empire with the *barbaricum*. This passage is hardly at all a presage of the Decline and Fall; but as Gibbon pursues the five theatres in turn, new perspectives begin to appear. The sequence of the 'theatres of war' forms a circuit of the empire's frontiers, recalling – now the empire is near its end – the circuit of the Roman provinces in chapter 1, carried out when the empire was at its height under the Antonines;⁶⁴ like it, also, in following a course counter-clockwise from west southabout to east and returning to the centre. Germany, Britain and Africa belong to Valentinian's west; 'the East', by which is meant the Persian frontier, is Valens's responsibility but does not belong to the history of barbarian pressure; while 'the Danube' is the western empire's frontier with the *barbaricum* from Rhaetia to Pannonia, the eastern empire's from there to the Euxine and the Pontic steppe. The catastrophe of Valens's reign will occur there when Gratian has succeeded Valentinian, but whether there is any hint of that in chapter 25 remains to be seen.

Germany, the first of the five theatres, is the scene of barbarian frontier warfare of the most familiar kind. The Alamanni – the Franks do not appear in this narrative – are offended by a Roman decision to reduce

⁶² Ammianus, 26, 4 (Rolfe, 1939/1986, II, pp. 594–5); Zosimus, 4, 4 (Ridley, 1982/2006, p. 72); 4, 9 (p. 74).

⁶³ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 988–9. ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 47–55. *FDF*, pp. 430–2.

the value, as well as the quantity, of the presents to which they were entitled, either from custom or treaty, on the accession of a new emperor. They expressed . . . their strong sense of the national affront.⁶⁵

We might be on the New York frontier, reading about the Five Nations. These tribes, however, are nearly, if never quite, the military equals of the Romans, and the disaster of the year 406 may be presaged when

the military force of the whole nation, in deep and solid columns, broke through the barrier of the Rhine during the severity of a northern winter.⁶⁶

Even in such force, however, they come for rapine, and what the Scottish Border would call blackmail, rather than conquest, and the problem of barbarian settlement has already appeared, but only in limited form. Major operations, by Valentinian and his generals, are carried into barbarian territory as they have been since the days of Julius Caesar:

But the wise monarch, instead of aspiring to the conquest of Germany, confined his attentions to the important and laborious defence of the Gallic frontier, against an enemy whose strength was renewed by a stream of daring volunteers, which incessantly flowed from the most distant tribes of the North.⁶⁷

Gibbon, perhaps, is writing nostalgically, presenting Valentinian as the last of the Augusti who knew how the frontiers were to be maintained, while at the same time raising the question whether the Germans were *gentes*, nations of shared kindred and ancestry, or bands of adventurers whose ancestry and history had yet to be invented. The Burgundians, who now appear as rivals to the Alamanni, seem to possess myths of identity, but they too offer to make war if not accorded 'the support and subsidies which Valentinian has promised'.⁶⁸ When the Romans instigate the murder of a German chief by a kinsman, Gibbon observes that

The violation of the laws of humanity and justice betrayed their secret apprehension of the weakness of the declining empire. The use of the dagger is seldom adopted in the public councils, as long as they retain any confidence in the power of the sword.⁶⁹

The trope reminds us that Valentinian's victories are to be the last of their kind. The empire is dying of the failure of virtue.

If the Alamanni and Burgundians are peoples of the *limites* and *barbaricum*, a third Germanic nation is now to be presented, which will open up new histories and a new historiography. The Saxons, in whose name 'we have a dear and domestic interest', inhabit 'a contracted territory'

⁶⁵ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 989. ⁶⁶ *Ibid.* ⁶⁷ p. 992. ⁶⁸ p. 993. ⁶⁹ p. 991.

incapable of pouring forth the inexhaustible swarms ... who reigned over the ocean, who filled the British island with their language, their laws, and their colonies, and who so long defended the liberty of the North against the arms of Charlemagne.⁷⁰

The original *gens* was enlarged to include those of other ancestries, or none. Mention of their name, however, expands the history of the German frontier into that of the British, and opens the door into a post-Roman and medieval set of narratives in which Gibbon reveals a deep interest though he will never be in a position to write it. The Decline and Fall has acquired a future beyond itself, and his principal sources for post-Roman history have begun to appear in his footnotes: the Abbé Dubos's *Histoire Critique de l'Etablissement de la Monarchie Française dans les Gaules*, the Comte du Buat's *Histoire Ancienne des Peuples de l'Europe*, and the Saxon councillor Johann Jakob Mascov's *History of the Ancient Germans* (known to Gibbon only in English translation).⁷¹ From now on his eye will repeatedly be on this medieval horizon; but the immediate question is that of where the 'inexhaustible swarms' of Saxons came from. The solution is that adventurers from all over Germany joined themselves to the eponymous tribal nucleus and that:

the various troops of pirates and adventurers who fought under the same standard were insensibly united in a permanent society, at first of rapine, and afterwards of government,

much as had once happened on the seven hills of Rome.

A military confederation was gradually moulded into a national body by the gentle operation of marriage and consanguinity; and the adjacent tribes, who solicited the alliance, accepted the name and laws of the Saxons.⁷²

The modern interest in the invention of identity was far from unknown in the eighteenth century; but the Saxons took shape as a people of shipmen rather than of herdsmen and ploughmen (a *tangata waka*, not a *tangata whenua*⁷³).

Every tide might float down the Elbe whole fleets of canoes, filled with hardy and intrepid associates, who aspired to behold the unbounded prospects of the ocean, and to taste the wealth and luxury of unknown worlds. It should seem probable, however, that the most numerous auxiliaries of the Saxons were furnished by the nations who dwelt along the shores of the Baltic. They possessed arms and ships,

⁷⁰ p. 994.

⁷¹ Womersley, 1994, III, pp. 1212 (Du Bos, here 'Dubos'), 1201 (du Buat, here 'Buat-Nançay'), 1240 (Mascov). All three names appear in various spellings.

⁷² Womersley, 1994, I, p. 995.

⁷³ For these Maori terms, relevant in the history of Pacific colonisation, see Pocock, 2005.

the art of navigation, and the habits of naval war . . . The rumour of the successful armaments which sailed from the mouth of the Elbe would soon provoke them to cross the narrow isthmus of Schleswig, and to launch their vessels on the great sea.⁷⁴

Tacitus says of the Suiones, a Baltic people, that their fleets were capable of the open sea (*in ipso oceano classibus valent*).⁷⁵ Gibbon suggests that such seamen found the exits from the Baltic too often blocked by ice, and were reduced either to transporting their ships across the Danish peninsula or to making use of the ‘canoes’ of the Elbe⁷⁶ – recalling the Danubian Goths who had infested the Black Sea and Aegean in the third century. Latin and Greek historians did not know much about ‘barbarian’ capacity to build galleys or longships, and nearly all Gibbon has to say of the Saxons as the maritime people he cannot deny them to have been has them going to sea in crafts of basketwork lapped in ox-hide, a description for which he relies on Sidonius Apollinaris with a modern commentary by Dubos.⁷⁷ Though far from knowledgeable in matters of navigation, he overcomes his difficulty in believing that such coracles could have survived in the oceanic waters of the North Sea or the Bay of Biscay, though he suggests that many losses and shipwrecks must have gone unrecorded; but he cannot deny that the Romans were compelled to provide for defence against pirates and raiders along the coasts of Gaul and Britain – at which point his account of ‘German’ barbarism enlarges into a wider field. These ‘Saxon shores’ are *limites* of a kind other than the great rivers, but piracy in Britain will become settlement and the creation of England. Whether the light craft he has described were capable of transporting a migrating people is a problem for him, and he prefers to describe them as vikings ascending rivers and making portages into others, descending through Gaul as far as the Mediterranean. Like other transgressors of *limites*, they might find themselves serving in the Roman armies, and this section concludes with an account of a band of Saxons who offered themselves as mercenaries, but were treacherously massacred or consigned to the beasts in the theatre. Symmachus the civilised pagan is the source for this, and Gibbon comments adversely on his values.⁷⁸ But the wicker and ox-hide boats of the Saxons are identical with the currachs of the seas around north Britain, and their seaworthiness and transport capacity will be a question in the historical controversy surrounding Gibbon’s next theatre of barbarian history. The *barbaricum* is about to extend itself into history both archipelagic and Atlantic.

⁷⁴ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 994.

⁷⁵ Tacitus, *Germania*, c 44. A description of their galleys follows.

⁷⁶ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 994–5. ⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, and nn. 104–5.

⁷⁸ For all this, see *ibid.*, p. 996 and nn. 106–7.

(V)

The Rhine and Danube are the great *limites* across which the central provinces of the *imperium* interact with the European *barbaricum*, but there are two further *limites* in outlying provinces which are to play roles of their own in the history of both empire and historiography. With one of these, the British, Gibbon has begun to deal. It consists, with apparent simplicity, of two lines of defence across the neck of a large and complex island: ‘Hadrian’s wall’ in Northumberland and the ‘Antonine wall’ between the Forth and Clyde estuaries. The highlands north of the latter are known as ‘Caledonia’ and are inhabited by two groups of peoples, the Scots and the Picts. It is constantly a temptation to emperors to draw upon the legions manning the island frontier for service on the continent, and the Scots and Picts have been raiding the British provinces during the reigns of Julian and his successors. As Ammianus’s language shows, however, the scene is further complicated by the advent of maritime barbarians. Strategically speaking, the Saxons are coming ashore and raiding, if not yet settling, the eastern coasts; and there may be a western menace if the Scots or *Scoti* are held to be sea-raiders from Ireland. Historiographically, of course, Gibbon knows that he is on the brink of two post-Roman national histories; the Saxons and their allies will convert much of Britain into England, and the Scots will give their name to a kingdom – by Gibbon’s time a nation – extending south from Caledonia to the vicinity of Hadrian’s wall. It is the highly debatable historiography of the latter that will affect his writing of chapter 25.

In the narrative that chapter provides of the barbarian inroads during the reign of Valentinian, events in Britain play a fairly simple role. The government and defence of the provinces have been neglected by ‘the eunuchs of Constantius’⁷⁹ and after Julian’s reign

the hostile tribes of the North, who detested the pride and power of the King of the World

– an Ossianic title which Gibbon had used before, rather more sceptically than he does here⁸⁰ –

suspended their domestic feuds; and the barbarians of the land and sea, the Scots, the Picts, and the Saxons, spread themselves, with rapid and irresistible fury, from the wall of Antoninus to the shores of Kent.⁸¹

⁷⁹ p. 999. ⁸⁰ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 152 and n. 14; *FDF*, pp. 455–6.

⁸¹ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 1000. It is here that Gibbon mentions the alleged cannibalism of the Attacotti, a people who appear both as raiders and conscripts in the Roman army.

This is a lapse into disorder rather than a threat of conquest. Theodosius, ‘the father of a line of emperors’,⁸² to whom Valentinian gives the command, restores government in a series of actions more exemplary than heroic.

The scattered and desultory warfare of the barbarians, who infested the land and sea, deprived him of the glory of a signal victory; but the prudent spirit and consummate art of the Roman general were displayed in the operations of two campaigns, which successively rescued every part of the province from the hands of a cruel and rapacious enemy. The splendour of the cities and the security of the fortifications were diligently restored by the paternal care of Theodosius, who with a strong hand confined the trembling Caledonians to the northern angle of the island, and perpetuated, by the name and settlement of the new province of *Valentia* –

the lowlands between the walls of Hadrian and Antoninus –

the glories of the reign of Valentinian.⁸³

Though conducted at campaign level, this is no more than police work, the restoration of a diocese too remote to threaten the structure of continental empire. In introducing it, however, Gibbon steps into history not only maritime, but archipelagic and even Atlantic, and into a controversy in which his decision to involve himself seems unnecessary and remains enigmatic. The section opens:

The fabulous colonies of Egyptians and Trojans, of Scandinavians and Spaniards, which flattered the pride and amused the credulity of our rude ancestors, have insensibly vanished in the light of science and philosophy. The present age is satisfied with the simple and rational opinion that the islands of Great Britain and Ireland were gradually peopled from the adjacent continent of Gaul,⁸⁴

and Ireland, though Gibbon is not saying so, from Britain. He is not merely engaging in a philosophic dismissal of medieval myth and humanist credulity, but choosing to take part – again without saying so – in a vehement contemporary debate among the antiquarians of all three of the kingdoms under the British crown. A crucial footnote runs:

In the dark and doubtful paths of Caledonian antiquity, I have chosen for my guides two learned and ingenious Highlanders, whom their birth and education had peculiarly qualified for that office. See *Critical Dissertation on the Origin, Antiquities, etc. of the Caledonians*, by Dr John Macpherson, London, 1768, in 4to; and *Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland*, by James Macpherson, Esq., London, 1773, in 4to, third edit. Dr Macpherson was a minister in the Isle of Skye; and it is a circumstance honourable for the present

⁸² p. 1001. ⁸³ pp. 1001–2. Gibbon’s emphasis. ⁸⁴ pp. 996–97.

age, that a work replete with erudition and criticism should have been composed in the most remote of the Hebrides.⁸⁵

John Macpherson had died some years previously. What Gibbon did not here tell his readers – who must soon have discovered it for themselves – was that James Macpherson was none other than the editor, translator, author or fabricator – the matter is still in dispute – of the poems of Ossian. Gibbon had alluded to these early in the *Decline and Fall*, in language suggesting a sentimental attraction to their heroic glamour, paired with a Humean distrust of their authenticity.⁸⁶ Since 1771, however, the Ossianic question had become a detail, though an important one, in a much wider controversy, into which Gibbon now chose to enter. The issue was that of the origins of the Scots or Scoti, a Gaelic people located by both oral tradition and ancient historians on either side of the Irish Sea, where they had arrived by routes still in dispute. The controversy was alive as Gibbon wrote, and he was about to engage in it, though without, as we shall see, stating it in its full complexity.⁸⁷

The Scoti – a people now appearing in Roman history proper – had given their name to the kingdom and peoples of modern Scotland, but had come to act relatively late in that entity's history. Gaelic tradition and medieval Latinity agreed in locating them in Ireland, where they had arrived – perhaps as a people originally Scythian – by either a southern or a northern route⁸⁸ (hence Gibbon's fabulous Spaniards and Scandinavians) before crossing the Northern Channel into the remotest parts of Britain, where at some time they overcame and absorbed the Picts or *picti*, a Roman name for peoples of another derivation, lacking a voice, tradition or identity of their own. The interplay between Irish and Scottish Gaeldom had become crucial in the historiography of both islands, and during the sixteenth century there had taken shape a narrative – *nobiliaire* in the case of George Buchanan, *royale* in that of King James VI – in which Irish adventurers were shown establishing a kingdom in Dalriada in the west Highlands and Islands, which in due course overcame the Picts and became Scotland, after originating either in historical time around 500 AD or in traditional time perhaps a thousand years earlier.⁸⁹ During the eighteenth century, however, there occurred two drastic innovations in Scottish historiography. In the first of them, the Jacobite antiquary and Catholic priest Thomas Innes (whom Gibbon does not mention) had

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, n. 110. ⁸⁶ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 151–2: *FDF*, pp. 426, 455–6.

⁸⁷ There is an extensive literature on this subject, especially when its Irish dimension is taken into account. I have relied chiefly on Kidd, 1993 and 1999, O'Halloran, 2004, and (with reservations) Trevor-Roper, 2008.

⁸⁸ O'Halloran, 2004, pp. 13–70. ⁸⁹ Trevor-Roper, 2008, chs. 2 and 3.

effectively destroyed the mythical history of the Dalriadic kingdom,⁹⁰ leaving it a late barbarian phenomenon of the Roman decline. He had suggested that the true history of ancient Caledonia was that of the Picts, with the Scots as late-comers from Ireland; but this in turn raised the question of the Scots in the history of Ireland, and of what other peoples might be met with there. At this point there recurred a mythic history that identified the Irish as ‘Scoti’, a people of Scythian and Phoenician origin arriving from Egypt, Africa and Spain and colonising Ireland from Cantabria and Galicia – perhaps in Phoenician galleys more capable than coracles and curraghs of navigating the Bay of Biscay. Innes, a Scot, was not primarily concerned with Irish prehistory, but thought either a Spanish or a Scandinavian origin possible.⁹¹ He did not much explore the sequence of Milesians, Tuatha de Danaan and Fírbolg provided by Irish tradition and antiquarianism; and it was a question whether this could be made to hold its own.

The second innovation was that proposed by James Macpherson. The Ossianic poems he published in the 1760s had by the time Gibbon was composing his second volume become part but not all of a radical reshaping of Dalriadic history, in which the Scots were a people taking shape in the west Highlands and Hebrides, and proceeding not only to the conquest but to the actual population of an Ireland as close as Antrim is to Kintyre. In his *Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland*, published in 1771, he made the Scoti the authors of both Scottish and Irish history; the Picts, a people perhaps British but not Gaelic, were relegated to passivity, and Ireland might have no history other than a Scottish. It was this startling thesis – demanding much more than a simple acceptance of the authenticity of the Ossianic poems – which Gibbon chose to adopt in chapter 25 of the *Decline and Fall*; a choice certainly easier to criticise than to explain.

He did not employ (neither had Macpherson in 1771) the language of sentimental primitivism but that of modern stadial history. Readers of earlier volumes will recall how the English antiquarians Thomas Carte and James Parsons, both known to Gibbon, had employed the genealogy of the sons of Noah to explain how the diverse landscapes of Britain came to be populated by pastoralists descended from Magog and agriculturalists descended from Gomer, both sons of Japhet.⁹² It is this thesis, shorn of its biblicism, which Gibbon now employs.

⁹⁰ Innes, 1879 (original 1729); Kidd, 1993, pp. 101–7; Trevor-Roper, 2008, pp. 64–71; O’Halloran, 2004, pp. 30–6.

⁹¹ Innes, 1879, *passim*.

⁹² Carte, 1747; Parsons, 1767; *NCG*, pp. 346–61; *BSE*, pp. 65–78.

The hand of nature had contributed to mark the ancient distinction of the Scots and Picts. The former were the men of the hills, and the latter those of the plain. The eastern coast of Caledonia may be considered as a level and fertile country, which, even in a rude state of tillage, was capable of producing a considerable quantity of corn; and the epithet of *cruitnich*, or wheat-eater, expressed the contempt or envy of the carnivorous highlanders . . . The highlanders were condemned to the occupation of shepherds and hunters; and as they seldom were fixed to any permanent habitation, they acquired the expressive name of SCOTS, which, in the Celtic tongue, is said to be equivalent to that of *wanderers*, or *vagrants*. The inhabitants of a barren land were urged to seek a fresh supply in the waters . . . they acquired, by slow degrees, the art, or rather the habit, of managing their boats in a tempestuous sea,⁹³ and of steering their nocturnal course by the light of the well-known stars. The two bold headlands of Caledonia almost touch the shores of a spacious island . . . It is *probable* that in some remote period of antiquity the fertile plains of Ulster received a colony of hungry Scots; and that the strangers of the North, who had dared to encounter the arms of the legions, spread their conquests over the savage and warlike natives of a solitary island. It is *certain* that, in the declining age of the Roman empire, Caledonia, Scotland, and the Isle of Man were inhabited by the Scots, and that the kindred tribes, who were often associated in military enterprise . . . long cherished the lively tradition of their common name and origin; and the missionaries of the Isle of Saints, who diffused the light of Christianity over North Britain, established the vain opinion that their Irish countrymen were the natural, as well as the spiritual, fathers of the Scottish race. . . . The Scottish nation, with mistaken pride, adopted their Irish genealogy; and the annals of a long line of imaginary kings have been adorned by the fancy of Boethius and the classic elegance of Buchanan.⁹⁴

There are Pictish intimations here, though Gibbon does not seem to develop them. The agriculturalists of the east are more likely to become inhabitants of a settled kingdom than the herdsmen, fishermen and warriors of the Gaelic west. More importantly still, Ireland, conquered if not populated by pastoral barbarians, is being denied any autonomous role in the creation of the archipelagic cultures; and the signal absence from Gibbon's narrative is that of any Irish response to Macpherson's radically innovative claims. We know that there was such a response, largely in the form of the wholly justified assertion by Gaelic scholars that the Ossianic poems were of Irish provenance and that Gaelic culture had taken shape in Ireland before moving east to Dalriada; this was also loudly affirmed by Macpherson's principal English critic, John Whitaker.⁹⁵ But Macpherson, Gibbon, and Whitaker most of all, were at one in affirming

⁹³ The distinctions between 'art' and 'habit' indicate the pre-modern difficulty in imagining long-range navigation without a written or printed cartography.

⁹⁴ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 997–9. Gibbon's emphasis. 'Boethius' is Hector Boece, a principal author of Dalriadic history.

⁹⁵ Whitaker, 1773a, 1773b.

that the history of the Atlantic archipelago had been formed by British tribes emigrating from Gaul in a series of waves throughout the centuries; it was pressure from the south, by Belgae, Romans and perhaps Picts, which had confined the Gaels to the north-west and led to their emigration to Ireland; and Whitaker had insisted that Ireland had been populated by Britons emigrating from the west coasts of Britain under Belgic and Roman pressure.⁹⁶ Among these the Scots had taken shape as a people of cattle-raiding vagrants, until the house of Fingal sung by Ossian (or rather Oisín) had been replaced by that of Fergus, under whom the reverse emigration to Caledonia and the settlement of Dalriada had occurred in the fifth century AD.⁹⁷ Whitaker has no objection to repeatedly citing Ossian (in Macpherson's editions) as an authentic source for the history of Irish Gaeldom,⁹⁸ but what is totally lacking from all these English and Scottish writers is any respect for the struggle of Irish antiquaries, chief among them Charles O'Connor, to establish a history of pre-Christian Irish history independent of Britain.⁹⁹ The Milesian sequence on which it still must rest was too difficult to reduce to a sequence of written histories that could be criticised and restated as truth;¹⁰⁰ and in an age before archaeology there were no rivals to the written text. Though beginning to change, this was a real difficulty for eighteenth-century historians; but something more, amounting to sheer national prejudice, is required to account for passages such as Gibbon's

Yet I am informed that some champions of the *Milesian colony* may still be found among the original natives of Ireland. A people dissatisfied with their present condition grasp at any visions of their past or future glory.¹⁰¹

Gibbon is saying that he has not read the Irish antiquaries, who by this time included those of English as well as Irish descent, Protestants as well as Catholics. In his later years he gave support to the Scottish historian John Pinkerton, for whom the Picts had been a Gothic people capable of ordered liberty, whereas all Gaels either side of the Irish Sea were irredeemable barbarians.¹⁰²

Whitaker had not dissimilarly written, of the Irish author Sylvester O'Halloran:¹⁰³

⁹⁶ e.g. Whitaker, 1773a, II, pp. 235–40; 1773b, p. 157.

⁹⁷ Whitaker, 1773a, II, pp. 250–1, 265–6.

⁹⁸ See his notes at the end of successive chapters of the *History of Manchester*, vol. II.

⁹⁹ O'Halloran, 2004, *passim*. ¹⁰⁰ O'Halloran, 2004, esp. pp. 127–40.

¹⁰¹ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 997, n. 108.

¹⁰² For Pinkerton and his association with Gibbon, see *EE*, pp. 541–4; Trevor-Roper, 2008, pp. 145–50; Trevor-Roper, 2010, pp. 161–75.

¹⁰³ O'Halloran, 2004, pp. 4, 38–9, 107–8.

And this Introduction to the Irish history,¹⁰⁴ though it is animated with an uncommon spirit of patriotism, and has actually vindicated Irish history from many gross and established mis-representations, is not written in a strain of cool and judicious argumentation. I am sorry to say it, because I esteem the patriot and honour the vindicator in Mr O'Halloran. But in reasoning he is often impertinent, in etymology generally ridiculous (see p. 199, etc.) and in early history astonishingly credulous, as visionary as a winter's tale, and as fantastical as the dream of a feverish brain. And I force myself to speak thus strongly against the Introduction, in order to check (if I can) that torrent of ridiculous and imaginary history, which the Irish are now busily discharging upon us; as I have recently endeavoured to dam that up for ever, which their brethren and antagonists of the Highlands have equally let loose upon the nation. True history can only subsist upon the destruction of both. And to beat down that wretched spirit of credulity which has been in every age the fixed and hereditary feature of all the remains of the ancient Britons among us, is absolutely necessary, in order to maintain the dignity of the national identity, and to vindicate the honour of the national understanding.¹⁰⁵

Comment on this would be superfluous. Gibbon is probably not far from Whitaker in holding that there can be no Irish and no Gaelic history which is other than a British and Gallic history, and his dismissal of Irish antiquity is similar in its effect to Whitaker's oblique yet furious denunciation. It remains a question why he sided with Macpherson. A personal quarrel with Whitaker is a possible answer. After some friendly correspondence, he had sent him in 1776 advance proofs of the *Decline and Fall's* first volume, in which chapter 15 and 16 were not included. We know that these chapters were written when the rest of the book was already in print,¹⁰⁶ and this may explain the omission; but Whitaker took offence, and concluded that Gibbon had concealed the unlimited extent of his anti-Christian intentions.¹⁰⁷ In after years he wrote a long and vicious criticism of the *Decline and Fall's* last three volumes. Personal enmity towards him, however, does not seem an adequate explanation of Gibbon's dismissal of Whitaker in chapter 25, and a lingering Ossianism on the former's part is less than convincing.

It remains therefore a mystery, as was remarked by the late Hugh Trevor-Roper in a posthumous publication,¹⁰⁸ why Gibbon chose to endorse the Macpherson thesis, and indeed why he thought it necessary to engage in the controversy at all. It is clear that he was becoming increasingly interested in the barbaric origins of the post-Roman kingdoms of western Europe, and so moved from the Saxon origins of England to the Gaelic and Pictish origins of Scotland; but here he became involved in a debate which, while taking sides in it, he did not fully explore. It is not

¹⁰⁴ O'Halloran, 1772. ¹⁰⁵ Whitaker, 1773a, p. 308. ¹⁰⁶ *RFT*, pp. 6–7.

¹⁰⁷ McCoy, 1933, pp. 89–93. ¹⁰⁸ Trevor-Roper, 2008, p. 141.

historically intelligible without the Irish dimension he denied as completely as did both Macpherson and Whitaker, and no pattern of archipelagic historiography takes shape as we investigate Gibbon's chapters. Whitaker himself – whatever Gibbon or other readers may think of him – is an interesting figure in the growth of English county antiquarianism; he is beginning to move from antiquities to archaeology,¹⁰⁹ and his *History of Manchester* places that city at the centre of a series of circles which expand to make visible the history of the Atlantic archipelago as he understood it.¹¹⁰ But these are fields into which Gibbon does not lead us, and his engagement in the Caledonian problem is only the prelude to the British section of chapter 25, from which he turns to the next frontier.

(VI)

This lies in Roman Africa, and consists neither of a fortified wall like those in Britain, nor of broad navigable rivers like those in Europe and Mesopotamia; rather of a loose chain of posts and fortifications, separating the urbanised coastlands that produce grain for export from a high country inhabited by transhumant shepherds like those Gibbon had described in western Caledonia. These are ruled by clan chieftains and warlords interacting with Roman control in the ways familiar to those who know the European *barbaricum*; it is a difference that beyond the Germans, Goths and Sarmatians lie the grasslands of Scythia, while behind the Moors – as Gibbon chooses to call them – lie the untraversable sands of the Sahara. Here, however, Gibbon turns suddenly from praise of Valentinian as a wise and moderate prince and general to depicting him as a palace ruler deceived by corrupt courtiers and unable to inform himself of what provincial governors may be doing in his name. The section opens:

The prince who refuses to be the judge, instructs his people to consider him as the accomplice of his ministers,¹¹¹

and consists largely of a narrative of the misdeeds of Count Romanus, who exploits the provincials by refusing to defend them against highland raiders, corrupts the officer sent from Trier to enquire into their complaints, and communicates ahead of them with his confederates at the emperor's court. A point is reached where the citizens of Leptis are

¹⁰⁹ Whitaker, 1773a, I, pp. 16–22, for his interest in artefacts.

¹¹⁰ Whitaker, 1773b, flyleaf: 'This work' – the *History of Manchester* – 'is not merely the History of a single Town. It is on a more liberal and extensive plan. And Manchester is only the center [*sic*] of a large circle, that generally extends itself over the island.'

¹¹¹ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 1002.

compelled to repudiate their own charges, and those who first made them are punished with mutilation.

If the severity of Valentinian had been rightly directed, it would have fallen on the guilty head of Romanus. But . . . a bloody sentence was pronounced, without hesitation, by the rash and headstrong cruelty of Valentinian. . . . Romanus, elated by impunity and irritated by resistance, was still continued in the military command, till the Africans were provoked, by his avarice, to join the rebellious standard of Firmus, the Moor.¹¹²

If Firmus ranks as a barbarian – he is a powerful and wealthy tributary prince¹¹³ – his incursion is the product of a province's rebellion. A revision of rhetorics is going on here. From Valentinian the statesmanlike general and emperor (notably in religious matters) we suddenly revert to Valentinian the palace tyrant, ordering executions in moments of fury and unable to inform himself on what is going on at a distance. At the end of his next volume, Gibbon will famously say that the 'simple and obvious' explanation of the empire's decay is its 'immoderate greatness', and perhaps it is the problem of distance, communication and information that is being brought forward here. Perhaps, on the other hand, we are looking merely at rhetorical historiography, in which an emperor's good and bad qualities are separately listed and displayed in separate narratives; is there a connective tissue, of irony, tragedy or even comparison, linking the various accounts of Valentinian given in chapter 25? Gibbon follows Ammianus throughout, with supplements from Jerome and Orosius in the next century and corrections in matters of detail from Tillemont,¹¹⁴ and it may be that this is not a 'philosophical' chapter at all.

The antithesis of good and bad government, however, provides one, if not the only, way of reaching the end of the reign of Valentinian. The guilty Romanus is superseded by Theodosius, the deliverer – Gibbon calls him the conqueror¹¹⁵ – of Britain, and the chapter recounts his successful campaign against Firmus, ending in the latter's suicide. But

Africa had been lost by the vices of Romanus; it was restored by the virtues of Theodosius; and our curiosity may be usefully directed to the inquiry of the respective treatment which the two generals received from the Imperial court. The authority of Count Romanus had been suspended by the master-general of the cavalry, and he was committed to safe and honourable custody till the end of the war. His crimes were proved by the most authentic evidence, and the public expected, with some impatience, the decree of severe justice. But the partial and powerful favour of Mellobaudes¹¹⁶ encouraged him to challenge his legal judges, to obtain repeated

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 1003. ¹¹³ p. 1004. ¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, n. 122. ¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1002.

¹¹⁶ Gibbon does not identify this figure until ch. 26 (Womersley, 1994, I, p. 1058), where he appears as a Frank and a minister under Gratian.

delays for the purpose of procuring a crowd of friendly witnesses, and, finally, to cover his guilty conduct by the additional guilt of fraud and forgery. About the same time the restorer of Britain and Africa, on a vague suspicion that his name and services were superior to the rank of a subject, was ignominiously beheaded at Carthage. Valentinian no longer reigned; and the death of Theodosius, as well as the impurity of Romanus, may justly be imputed to the arts of the ministers who abused the confidence and deceived the inexperienced youth of his sons.¹¹⁷

It is a poor end to the reign of the last emperor under whom the frontiers were effectively defended; but Gibbon has been interested since his earliest researches in the uncertain blend of hereditary and elective succession to the emperorship,¹¹⁸ and since the *Decline and Fall's* earliest chapters, in what happens when an experienced emperor leaves an inexperienced son. Later in this chapter he will tell us how Valentinian's son Gratian came to be his fellow Augustus, and in a later one still will ask whether Gratian's seeming virtues were not in fact those of his ministers.¹¹⁹ At this point it is their vices that count; but Valentinian himself shares responsibility for the impunity of Romanus. The emperor in the palace, the emperor in the field, and the emperor receiving information from provinces he never sees, may be roles very differently played by the same man; and rhetorical historiography has presented us with three Valentinians, never asking how they could be one.

In its last pages the section on Africa suddenly becomes philosophical history. South of 'the back settlements of the Mauritanian and Numidian provinces . . . the vast and inhospitable desert of the South extends above a thousand miles to the banks of the Niger'.¹²⁰ Gibbon seems to assume that the Romans and Carthaginians had no knowledge whatever of the peoples of Black Africa; had they had it

Carthage would have trembled at the strange intelligence that the countries on either side of the equator were filled with innumerable nations who differed only in their colour from the ordinary appearance of the human species; and the subjects of the Roman empire might have anxiously expected that the swarms of barbarians which issued from the North would soon be encountered from the South by new swarms of barbarians, equally fierce and equally formidable.¹²¹

But Roman Africa is a frontier without constant pressure from barbarians. It will be Vandals from Spain in the fifth century and Arabs from

¹¹⁷ p. 1006. Gibbon does not explore this episode in any further depth, here or in the next chapter; see p. 1072. 'About the same time' is a historian's way of signalling imperfect information.

¹¹⁸ See YEG, pp. 115–16, for his reading of La Blérierie on this question, recorded in the Lausanne Commonplace Book.

¹¹⁹ See the opening pages of ch. 27; Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 19–20, and below, p. 281.

¹²⁰ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 1007. ¹²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1008–8.

Egypt in the seventh who do more to bring down the Roman world than Saxons, Franks and Goths issuing from the north; and though Gibbon does not say so, we may suppose him thinking that the Sahara does not produce pastoral nomads like those of the steppe described by de Guignes. What he does say, however, is that sub-Saharan Africa does not produce barbarians capable of conquest.

The inaction of the negroes does not seem to be the effect either of their virtue or of their pusillanimity. They indulge, like the rest of mankind, their passion and appetites, and the adjacent tribes are engaged in frequent acts of hostility. But their rude ignorance has never invented any effectual weapons of defence or of destruction; they appear incapable of forming any extensive plans of government or conquest; and the obvious inferiority of their mental faculties has been discovered and abused by the nations of the temperate zone.¹²²

Gibbon elaborates this typically *philosophie* judgement in footnote references to the Abbé Prevost's *Histoire Générale des Voyages* and the relevant chapters of Raynal's *Histoire des Deux Indes*.¹²³ The former leads him to remark:

The nations of the sea-coast have been polished by European commerce, and those of the inland country have been improved by Moorish colonies.

But when he concludes this part of chapter 25 by saying:

Sixty thousand blacks are annually embarked from the coast of Guinea, never to return to their native country; but they are embarked in chains; and this constant emigration, which in the space of two centuries might have furnished armies to over-run the globe, accuses the guilt of Europe and the weakness of Africa,¹²⁴

it does not occur to him to grant Africans an active role in their history by asking whether the kingdoms of 'the inland country' played any part in the supply of slaves to the coast. The authors of the *Histoire des Deux Indes* knew rather better.¹²⁵ The Decline and Fall will take shape significantly in Mediterranean Africa; but it will be the work of Vandal invaders from the Vistula.

(VII)

From the African frontier (if frontier it was) chapter 25 moves on to the Persian. The chapter as a whole is constructed around Valentinian's

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 1008.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, n. 131. There is an extensive modern literature on racial prejudice in Enlightenment thought.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.* ¹²⁵ *BSE*, pp. 301–2.

decision to seat himself in the empire of the west, and the apparent explanation of this by a series of barbarian assaults on the western frontiers. With this move, however, we leave the *imperium* of Valentinian for that of his brother Valens, and the shadow of the coming disaster of Adrianople in 378 begins to fall on Gibbon's narrative. But the Persian frontier is not with a *barbaricum*, but with the rival empire of the Persians, and is governed, in more senses than one, by the treaty recently contracted by Jovian. Here it is desirable to look back to that much earlier chapter of the *Decline and Fall*¹²⁶ in which Gibbon declared that the Persians and the Germans – a name capable of including the Goths – were the principal agents in the decline of the late empire, but that the Germans would occupy a greater part of his history, on account of the 'domestic' interest of his readers, and western Europeans generally, in the legal and cultural identity inherited from them. Decline and Fall, we see once again, is a western phenomenon: the collapse of Roman capacity to deal with 'barbarian' peoples and the formation of Gothic and other Germanic kingdoms in the western provinces. This is not what happens in the provinces of the eastern empire, even after the Slavic inroads which are still centuries away; and the divergence of 'Byzantine' from 'Gothic' history begins from the circumstance that the frontier with Sassanid Persia was a frontier with a rival empire, conducted by means of the alternation between war and treaty which governs the relations between civilised peoples. There may be no *jus belli ac pacis* in the late antique world, but there are conventions and compacts understood and exploited by both parties. In entering the world of Valens, and then leaving it to return to that of Valentinian and his successors, Gibbon is balancing east against west, the relations between empires¹²⁷ against the triumph of barbarism and religion.

The ignominious treaty which saved the army of Jovian had been faithfully executed on the side of the Romans; and as they had solemnly renounced the sovereignty and alliance of Armenia and Iberia, those tributary kingdoms were exposed, without protection, to the arms of the Persian monarch. Sapor entered the Armenian territories at the head of a formidable host ... but it was the invariable practice of Sapor to mix war and negotiation,

as he had in dealing with Constantius, Julian and Jovian,

and to consider falsehood and perjury as the most powerful instruments of regal policy.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Chapter 8; Womersley, 1994, I, p. 230.

¹²⁷ McKitterick and Quinault, 1997 is the fullest study of Gibbon's thought on these matters, but deals mostly with the volumes of 1788.

¹²⁸ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 1008.

These are the corruptions of civilisation; Gibbon's portrayal of Shapur is that of an oriental, not of a barbarian. By devious means including treachery and murder, he obtains control of both kingdoms and installs satraps, who however are not Persians but natives, with the result that

he soon felt that a country is unsubdued as long as the minds of the people are actuated by an hostile and contumacious spirit. The satraps, whom he was obliged to trust, embraced the first opportunity of regaining the affections of their countrymen, and of signalling their immortal hatred of the Persian name.

We might be in the twenty-first century, and not far from the same regions. Religion is a factor if barbarism is not.

Since the conversion of the Armenians and Iberians, those nations considered the Christians as the favourites, and the Magians as the adversaries of the Supreme Being;

Gibbon's tone here is certainly deistic;

the influence of the clergy over a superstitious people was uniformly exerted in the course of Rome; and as long as the successors of Constantine disputed with those of Artaxerxes the sovereignty of the intermediate provinces, the religious connection always threw a decisive advantage in the scale of the empire.¹²⁹

This will not change until Zoroaster is replaced by Muhammad. Valens, 'who respected the obligations of the treaty . . . ventured, with slow and cautious measures, to support the Roman party' in both kingdoms; but Gibbon lacks historians who effectively supplement Ammianus's account of the intrigues and interventions of the two empires.¹³⁰ In a footnote he cites the modern *Universal History*, remarking:

The authors of that unequal work have compiled the Sassanian dynasty with erudition and diligence; but it is a preposterous arrangement to divide the Roman and Oriental accounts into two distinct histories.¹³¹

Gibbon had been wrestling with this problem since his youth,¹³² as had Beausobre in his history of Manichaeism; but there was no known Persian historian equivalent to Ammianus, and certainly none who could narrate the period from both points of view as a single history. Gibbon was obliged to fall back on a picturesque relation of the life and death of an Armenian pretender, in which the Romans played a disgraceful part;¹³³ but before

¹²⁹ p. 1009.

¹³⁰ p. 1008, n. 133, for his opinion of Moses of Chorene, an Armenian, and the later work of the Byzantine Procopius.

¹³¹ p. 1010, n. 137. ¹³² *EEG*, p. 30. ¹³³ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 1011–12.

doing so, he wrote a few sentences which situated the Persian frontier in the context of the next chapter.

The invasion of the Goths and Huns, which soon afterwards shook the foundations of the Roman empire, exposed the provinces of Asia to the arms of Sapor. But the declining age, and perhaps the infirmities of the monarch, suggested new maxims of tranquillity and moderation. His death, which happened in the full maturity of a reign of seventy years, changed in a moment the court and councils of Persia, and their attention was most probably engaged by domestic troubles . . . The remembrance of ancient injuries was lost in the enjoyment of peace. The kingdoms of Armenia and Iberia were permitted, by the mutual though tacit consent of both empires, to resume their doubtful neutrality. In the first years of the reign of Theodosius, a Persian embassy arrived at Constantinople to excuse the unjustifiable measures of the former reign, and to offer, as the tribute of friendship, or even of respect, a splendid present of gems, of silk, and of Indian elephants.¹³⁴

Diplomatic courtesies of this kind were common enough, and no guarantee of peace; but Gibbon appends a sentence in which the historian Orosius remarks that this *foedus* has kept *universus Oriens* in profound peace *usque ad nunc* (AD 416).¹³⁵ Shapur's successors have their own problems with Huns, who raid their eastern provinces¹³⁶ as the Goths are invading those of Rome, and by carrying the story down to the reign of Theodosius Gibbon is contextualising and dismissing the empire's relations with Persia, which will play little further part in the narrative of Decline and Fall. It is the Gothic frontier to which he now turns.

This is also the frontier delimited by the Danube; that formed by the Rhine is for the present of secondary significance; but what matters historiographically is that the Danube is divided in its course between two emperors and, as Gibbon and his readers are beginning to see things, two empires, so that he is required to write the histories of two reigns – those of Valentinian and Valens – and to look ahead into the divergent histories of east and west. From its sources not far from those of the Rhine through the province of Pannonia (modern Hungary and upper Serbia), the Danube is part of the empire *in occidente*, ruled by Valentinian, who is chiefly concerned with barbarians more Germanic than strictly Gothic. He has been the dominant figure of chapter 25; but Gibbon has already mentioned 'the invasion of the Goths and Huns', and is looking ahead to a subversion of the empire by Gothic peoples and war bands in the complex process of Decline and Fall. This will be a major occurrence – perhaps a moment of creation or invention – in the history of western Europe, but

¹³⁴ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 1010–11. ¹³⁵ p. 1011, n. 138.

¹³⁶ Heather, 2005, p. 152, for a great raid through Armenia and Cappadocia as far as Syria in 395.

will paradoxically be the outcome of a disaster occurring in the eastern empire. Gibbon is already looking ahead to a sentence in chapter 26, when he will observe:

The invasion of the Huns precipitated on the provinces of the West the Gothic nation, which advanced in less than forty years, from the Danube to the Atlantic, and opened a way, by the success of their arms, to the inroads of many hostile tribes more savage than themselves¹³⁷

and his third volume will be taken up with this journey of history itself from east to west, in which, among many other transitions, the Goths will become less Scythian and more Germanic. In chapter 25, however, this has yet to begin. The Goths are a problem for Valens as responsible for the empire's lower Danubian provinces, while Valentinian from his headquarters in Trier or Milan has to do with Alamanni and Quadi, German peoples long familiar to historians of the western empire.

The history of the Gothic peoples in what has come to be called eastern Europe, in this last stage of its extra-Roman existence, is historiographically uncertain to the point of being legendary. Gibbon now begins to follow the *Historia Gothorum* compiled by Jordanes or Jornandes (the latter Gibbon's spelling) a Byzantinised Goth of a later century,¹³⁸ and to make use of his modern authorities, du Buat and Mascov.¹³⁹ These tell him of the conquests of a centenarian¹⁴⁰ warrior named Hermanric, 'which extended from the Danube to the Baltic'¹⁴¹ and included peoples, mentioned by Tacitus, who may not have been German-speakers.¹⁴² Hermanric

reigned over the greatest part of Germany and Scythia with the authority of a conqueror, and sometimes with the cruelty of a tyrant. But he reigned over a part of the globe incapable of perpetuating and adorning the glory of its heroes. The name of Hermanric is almost buried in oblivion; his exploits are imperfectly known; and the Romans themselves appeared unconscious of the progress of an aspiring power which threatened the liberty of the North and the peace of the empire.¹⁴³

There is in Gibbon's mind so close a connection between the capacity to write histories and the capacity to construct the institution of empire that we may wonder both whether Hermanric's dominion was more than a hegemony over warring clans and whether he himself is more than a figure of the pre-literate imagination. The Goths begin to become intelligible,

¹³⁷ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 1024.

¹³⁸ A controversial figure among recent historians; see below, pp. 264–65.

¹³⁹ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 1013, n. 141 (du Buat), 1017, n. 149 (Mascov).

¹⁴⁰ p. 1013. ¹⁴¹ p. 1014.

¹⁴² pp. 1013 (the 'Venedi' or Wends), 1014 (the 'Aestii' or Estonians). ¹⁴³ p. 1014.

and to behave intelligibly, only as they enter the world of recorded Roman history, and this happens as they decide to take part in the rebellion of Procopius, to which Gibbon's narrative now recurs.

The splendour and magnitude of this Gothic war are related by a contemporary historian;¹⁴⁴ but the events scarcely deserve the attention of posterity, except as the preliminary steps of the approaching decline and fall of the empire. Instead of leading the nations of Germany and Scythia to the banks of the Danube, or even to the gates of Constantinople, the aged monarch of the Goths resigned to the brave Athanaric the danger and glory of a defensive war, against an enemy who wielded with a feeble hand the powers of a mighty state¹⁴⁵

in whose history Athanaric's actions become intelligible and even actual, as those of Hermanric may not have been. The march of the barbarian nations to the gates of Constantinople is less a historical possibility than a rhetorical alternative. We have already been told that the Gothic decision to intervene on the side of Procopius was denounced and defended in terms of an alliance, almost a treaty, between Goths and Romans; that the war was conducted within Roman fortifications on a barbarian frontier, and decided largely by an embargo on all commerce with the Goths beyond it; and that it was terminated by a treaty between Valens and Athanaric in their own persons, meeting on boats in mid-stream so that neither should lose face by setting foot on the other's territory. We have left heroic legend for the history of state, and entered a narrative of the civilised conduct of occasional warfare, which only the Hunnic invasions will destroy. Valens, Athanaric, and their respective generals and chieftains,¹⁴⁶ will figure in the history of its collapse.

The circuit of the frontiers concludes close to where it began, in Valentinian's dealings with German peoples on the upper Danube and its sources. He remains a double figure: the formidable general who knows when to conclude a campaign, and the emperor imperfectly in command of his subordinates, one of whom – the son of a favourite – enrages the powerful Quadi by murdering their king at a banquet. It is no accident, in Gibbon's narrative, that this occurs when Theodosius is marching against Firmus in Africa, or that Valentinian ignores the complaints of the Illyrians against their provincial governor Probus.¹⁴⁷ The Quadi devastate Pannonia; Valentinian devastates their territories beyond the Danube; and when they send ambassadors to perform ritual submission – there is no Athanaric at their head – Valentinian flies into such a rage that he bursts a blood-vessel and dies; anger, a key to his personality, has killed

¹⁴⁴ Eunapius, the historian of the philosophers; p. 1016, n. 148. ¹⁴⁵ p. 1016.

¹⁴⁶ pp. 1013 (the Goths), 1016 (the Romans).

¹⁴⁷ pp. 1018 (Firmus), 1019–20 and n. 151 (Probus).

him in the end. Gibbon has given a rhetorically various portrait of the last effective emperor before the deluge; we may fairly wonder whether the several portraits to which it may be reduced amount to a unified study of a divided personality, or remain separate rhetorical exercises.

The function of chapter 25 has been to show the imperial machine still in control of the frontiers. Valentinian's death leads to a western succession crisis, when the sixteen-year-old Gratian, declared Augustus at Trier, is confronted by Valentinian II, aged four months when he is acclaimed in Pannonia; but the legions are easily brought to accept joint rule without resorting to civil war.¹⁴⁸ It is not the western empire which will fail to deal with the crisis of the next year, when the barbarian world is transformed by events that need global history to explain them.

¹⁴⁸ pp. 1021–2.

13 The geography and historiography of the western Decline and Fall

(I)

The structure of Gibbon's history, considered as a text, consists very largely of an alternation, sometimes between chapters and sometimes within them, of narrative with description; the former of actions and events, the latter of the institutions and situations of peoples, the empire and most recently the church. This has been presented as an alternation, in the terms used by Lacurne de Saint-Palaye, between the *récit de ce qu'il* – in this case a *peuple* – *a fait*, and the *peinture de ce qu'il a été*,¹ and the *peinture* has often consisted of erudite accounts of past states of law, institutions and culture, and of 'philosophical' accounts of these as marking moments in the *progrès de l'esprit humain*. *Récit* and narrative generally display the persistence of ancient rhetorical history long past the Renaissance into the eighteenth century and even into Gibbon's own writings; whereas *peinture* may easily be thought of, and often was, 'modern' – in Gibbon's terminology – as opposed to 'ancient'. There were, however, rhetorical and ancient modes of *peinture*, and we have to think of the turn from *récit* to *peinture* within the practice of rhetoric as well as of the turn from ancient to modern. Examples have already come up for consideration, and nowhere is this complex of alternations more evident than in the chapter with which Gibbon closes his second volume and for the first time begins to relate the history of Decline and Fall as an organising concept.

He opens chapter 26 with an account, drawn directly from Ammianus Marcellinus, of an earthquake and tsunami that devastated the east-central Mediterranean 'in the second year of the reign of Valentinian and Valens'.² This he dates in the year 365, but he has already arrived at the death of Valentinian ten years later, and is about to relate the disaster which befell Valens and began the culmination of the process he will call Decline and Fall. Pagans were inclined to consider natural disasters as

¹ For Sainte-Palaye, see *EEG*, pp. 243, 248; *NCG*, pp. 17, 281; *BSE*, p. 195.

² Womersley, 1994, I, p. 1023.

omens and portents of disaster in the human world, Christians to consider them signs of divine judgement leading to results of the same kind. Gibbon writes satirically of the latter mindset,³ but even in doing so maintains a non-causal connection between the earlier disaster and the later – unlike Ammianus, who had no need of a narrative of Decline and Fall, and wrote of the tsunami of 365 five books before recounting the omens which foretold no good of Valens's reign without his brother.⁴ Gibbon proceeds differently, offering a philosophical commentary on the relations between natural and human disaster, which will turn out curiously confused. The Romans, he says, 'considered these alarming strokes as the prelude only of still more dreadful calamities, and their fearful vanity was disposed to confound the symptoms of a declining empire and a sinking world'. They were not wrong in expecting calamities, only in the form these would take and the causes that would produce them. Gibbon proceeds:

the historian may content himself with an observation, which seems to be justified by experience, that man has much more to fear from the passions of his fellow-creatures than from the convulsions of the elements.

He has just told us that fifty thousand people lost their lives from the tsunami in Alexandria alone, and in the twenty-first century we are able to believe him. He goes on, with what looks like self-contradiction:

The mischievous effects of an earthquake or deluge, a hurricane or the eruption of a volcano, bear a very inconsiderable proportion to the ordinary calamities of war; as they are now moderated by the prudence or humanity of the princes of Europe, who amuse their own leisure and exercise the courage of their subjects in the practice of the military art.

Recalling a passage to be found in his early journals,⁵ this is a Voltairean sentiment; but *Candide*, passing from the sack of Thunder-ten-tronk to the earthquake of Lisbon, might or might not have agreed with it. Gibbon confuses his argument by proposing that war is more destructive than nature, at the very moment and in the very sentence where he claims that war is being 'moderated' under eighteenth-century conditions. He continues:

the laws and manners of modern nations protect the safety and freedom of the vanquished soldier; and the peaceful citizen has seldom reason to complain that his life or even his fortune is exposed to the rage of war. In the disastrous period of the fall of the Roman empire, which may justly be dated from the reign of Valens, the happiness and security of each individual were personally attacked, and the arts

³ *Ibid.*, p. 1024. ⁴ Ammianus, 26, 10, 15; 31, 1, 1–4. ⁵ *Journal C*, p. 18.

and labours of ages were rudely defaced by the Barbarians of Scythia and Germany. The invasion of the Huns precipitated on the provinces of the West the Gothic nation, which advanced, in less than forty years, from the Danube to the Atlantic, and opened a way, by the success of their arms, to the inroads of many hostile tribes more savage than themselves. The original principle of motion was concealed in the remote countries of the North, and the curious observation of the pastoral life of the Scythians or Tartars will illustrate the latent cause of these destructive emigrations.⁶

It is as if Gibbon's pen were for once travelling faster than his organising concepts can control. From the initial ambivalence about the destructiveness of war ancient and modern, he goes on to present the Decline and Fall as a calamity befalling the security and culture of every individual, and as a process of invasion by a series of barbarian nations emigrating on one another's heels in what historians had begun to call a *Völkerwanderung*. These are concepts much challenged and disputed by authors down to the present day, and though our business is not to judge Gibbon but to understand him, we shall want to know whether, after adopting these assumptions, he was able to construct his narrative around them. A less universal though still massive narrative may be extracted from the passage just quoted. The Decline and Fall here consists of the western consequences of an eastern event, whose original principle, or Montesquieuan *ressort*, lies still further east. The Goths enter the eastern empire as a migrating nation, and thereafter move within the empire into its western provinces; by Decline and Fall is meant the loss of imperial control over the latter. The breach of the western frontiers by other nations – Anglo-Saxons, Franks and Vandals among them – is the consequence of Gothic actions, which may explain the use of their name to denote invading barbarians and their culture in general; so that it is a Gothic history which must be related as that of the Decline and Fall in its first and decisive phase. The Goths, however, enter the empire less as invaders than as refugees, and for this we must understand the invasion of their territories by the Huns.

(II)

There will be no direct contact between Huns *en masse* and Roman power in chapter 26, or for several chapters after; their role is solely to set the Goths in movement. Ancient and modern historians agreed, however, that they played this role by means of their utter and terrifying strangeness, and their culturally induced battlefield tactics with which the Goths were

⁶ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 1024–5.

unable to cope. Ammianus describes them as hideous and astonishing, not so much barbarians as that term was understood along the frontiers – it is of course the ‘barbarian’ Goths who disintegrate before them – as people on the outer edge of humanity itself. They arrive on the borders of the known world, from the unknown spaces known as ‘Scythia’, a nomadic people practising no kind of agriculture and living off meat and milk in a virtual symbiosis with their horses – not much is said of cattle, oxen or sheep – out of which they have developed the high strategic mobility and the battlefield tactics of horse-archery that the Goths cannot resist. Persians and Romans, it is worth remembering, have included mounted archers in their armies for generations, and the frontier Goths may have imitated them; perhaps it is the combination of these with heavy cavalry and infantry that slows their response to the highly mobile Huns, but not much is to be read about the causes of Gothic defeat.

Ammianus’s account of the Hunnic irruption⁷ is rhetorical in character, and may be traced back to earlier Greek narratives of encounter with steppe peoples; Herodotus’s relation of the defeat of Darius by the Scythians inevitably comes to mind. Whatever the sources of his portrait of the Huns, it is of course the depiction of an Other and is censurable by the imperatives of a culture which enjoins us to deconstruct the Self and blames us for the construction of the Other. When we turn from ancient to modern descriptions of the Huns – that is, from Ammianus to Gibbon – we find that chapter 26 retains most of Ammianus’s account, including its emphasis on their utterly alien character, but is able to explain the sources of that alienness by situating it in contexts drawn from geography, world history and Enlightened theories of the progress of society. Gibbon has sources for all these, and is not required to construct his interpretation from its foundations.

His principal source is Joseph de Guignes’s *Histoire Générale des Huns, des Turcs, et des Mogols*, a work of the late 1750s studied at length in an earlier volume of this series.⁸ There it appeared as, among other things, a contribution to Christian and Enlightened world history of religion, but that does not concern Gibbon. De Guignes’s central achievement was that he was able to unite the histories of the three groups named in his title, in a general history of steppe nomadism in the Eurasian space bounded by the settled empires of China in the east, Rome and Europe in the west, and Persia followed by Islam and the Caliphates in the west-centre (which Europeans have come to term the Middle East). He had set up a model whereby Huns

⁷ Ammianus, 31, 1, 1–17. For modern analyses, see Matthews, 1989, pp. 332–42; Halsall, 2007, pp. 170–5.

⁸ De Guignes, 1758; *BSE*, chs. 6–8.

and their successors, entering and then recoiling from the inner Asian frontiers of China, might be seen setting off a chain reaction of nomad movements whose effects might be felt on the frontiers of the west. It was this that Gibbon was about to use in relating the Gothic disaster of 376–9.

The account he gives of the millennia-long culture of the steppe nomads is based partly on philosophical and conjectural history, partly on histories written and civil. Since pastoral peoples left to themselves are pre-literate, they do not write or even remember their own histories, and the former kind of history is therefore predominant in his text, even in making them *ce qu'ils ont été*. Gibbon is able to give a philosophical dress to the ancient perception of the horsemen of the north as scarcely human at all.

The different characters that mark the civilised nations of the globe may be ascribed to the use and the abuse of reason, which so variously shapes and so artificially composes the manners and opinions of an European or a Chinese.

The uniformity of human nature is necessary to the understanding of the infinite variety of human culture.

But the operation of instinct is more sure and simple than that of reason; it is much easier to ascertain the appetites of a quadruped than the speculations of a philosopher; and the savage tribes of mankind, as they approach nearer to the condition of animals, preserve a stronger resemblance to themselves and to each other. The uniform stability of their manners is the natural consequence of the imperfection of their faculties. Reduced to a similar situation, their wants, their desires, their enjoyments still continue the same; and the influence of food or climate, which, in a more improved state of society, is suspended or subdued by so many moral causes, most powerfully contributes to form and to maintain the national character of Barbarians.⁹

Any one tribe of primitive humans will be much like any other, and much like what its ancestors were a thousand years before. The reason for this is not genetic but economic; humans approximate to the condition of animals in proportion as they are hunter-gatherers and no more, preying on other animals and grazing on the earth as other species do. But a second glance at the nomads of the steppe informs us that they are not in fact hunter-gatherers and have begun moving away from the animal condition. They are shepherds, but shepherds of a peculiarly primitive sort. They have begun where others do, with the domestication of hooved mammals, but have not reached the stage of harnessing them to the wheel or plough. Consequently, they have not arrived at that second cusp of human progress, where the pastoral life begins to merge with the agricultural. The only animal we hear of as domesticated by them is the horse,

⁹ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 1025.

and they employ him not in cultivation but in the violent, male and honour-seeking pursuits of hunting and war. Their refusal to till the soil is said to be the effect of their 'indolence', but indolence can also be its product; there were many denunciations of the Highland Scottish or Native American cultures, in which the hunter-warrior males did nothing between the seasons of hunting and war. Nomad culture is a case of arrested development, and one of its features is that the food of a shepherd people consists – we saw this distinction in the case of the Scots and the Picts – never of cereals but only of meat and milk. This in turn had military and social consequences.

In the ages of rustic and martial simplicity, a people of soldiers and husbandmen are dispersed over the face of an extensive and cultivated country; and some time must elapse before the warlike youth of Greece or Italy could be assembled under the same standard, either to defend their own confines, or to invade the territories of the adjacent tribes. The progress of manufactures and commerce insensibly collects a large multitude within the walls of a city; but these subjects are no longer soldiers –

the secret of Roman decay? –

and the arts which adorn and improve the state of civil society corrupt the habits of the military life. The pastoral manners of the Scythians seem to unite the different advantages of simplicity and refinement. The individuals of the same tribe are constantly assembled, but they are assembled in a camp, and the native spirit of these dauntless shepherds is animated by mutual support and emulation. . . . The flocks and herds, after grazing all day in the adjacent pastures, retire, on the approach of night, within the protection of the camp. The necessity of preventing the most mischievous confusion in such a perpetual concourse of men and animals must gradually introduce, in the distribution, the order, and the guard of the encampment, the rudiments of the military art.

Gibbon makes clear that the normal rhythm of the herdsman's life is one of regular movement between summer and winter pastures that need not lie far apart. But this rhythm is easily displaced by the invasion of some other tribe in search of fresh pastures, and there will be no breach with the pastures abandoned, since there is no property in them; the people displaced set off to displace some other.

The camp, and not the soil, is the native country of the genuine Tartar. Within the precincts of that camp his family, his companions, his property, are always included, and in the most distant marches he is still surrounded by the objects which are dear or valuable or familiar in his eyes

(possibly including his wives and children, though Gibbon does not say so).

The thirst of rapine, the fear or the resentment of injury, the impatience of servitude, have, in every age, been sufficient causes to urge the tribes of Scythia

boldly to advance into some unknown countries, where they might hope to find a more plentiful subsistence or a less formidable enemy. The revolutions of the North have frequently determined the fate of the South; and in the conflict of hostile nations the victor and the vanquished have alternately drove, and been driven, from the confines of China to those of Germany.¹⁰

Gibbon acknowledges the authority of de Guignes, somewhat to the disadvantage of Montesquieu, in his footnotes to this passage.¹¹ The great historian of the nomad peoples has enabled him to present their expansion as a sequence of migrations, rather than empires of conquest: domino or snowball effects in which no one people need give more than a generic name to the initiation of a movement or the establishment of a probably transient hegemony. Each tribe possesses more or less of a formidable capacity for organising itself for war and moving itself over great distances, so that hegemonies may be asserted over wide areas without becoming stable empires.

He proceeds to explain how ‘Tartar princes’ (who have like Nimrod the mighty hunter emerged from the tribal warfare of the pastures) organise great hunts over extensive areas, driving the game into narrowing circles where they may easily be shot down. The hunt has taught the nomads the arts of war – the eye for country, the ability to move men and horses over it – which can as easily be displayed against other men as against beasts.

To employ against a human enemy the same patience and valour, the same skill and discipline, is the only alteration which is required in real war, and the amusements of the chase serve as a prelude to the conquest of an empire¹²

though perhaps not to its organisation or retention. A few pages later we find Gibbon explaining how

the perpetual conflict of those hostile nations [Scythian or Tartar] has sometimes terminated in the establishment of a powerful and despotic empire. The victor, enriched by the tribute and fortified by the arms of dependent kings, has spread his conquests over Europe or Asia; the successful shepherds of the North have submitted to the confinement of arts, of laws and of cities; and the introduction of luxury, after destroying the freedom of the people, has undermined the foundation of the throne.¹³

The decline and fall of a desert empire had been imagined by Adam Ferguson,¹⁴ and had the historians of Enlightened Europe known the *Muqaddimah* of Ibn Khaldun, they would instantly have greeted him as one of themselves. So far in this chapter, Gibbon has been writing philosophical history in the grand eighteenth-century manner, focused on the special case of peoples who have become shepherds without ceasing to be

¹⁰ pp. 1027–9. ¹¹ *Ibid.*, n. 10. ¹² p. 1030. ¹³ p. 1032. ¹⁴ NCG, pp. 350–4.

hunters. It has been conjectural history to the extent that it is dependent on the writings of travellers and of historians before its construction as a text; the Tartars have no civil history because they have written none, and we must depend on the historians of 'the learned and civilised nations of the South – the Greeks, the Persians, and the Chinese'.

Of these the first two know little of the steppe nomads: the Greeks and Romans indeed nothing (till now) but what they have learned from the Persians. The Greeks, however, have a literature of histories, the Persians only the epic poems of the *Shah-nama*, the work of Firdawsi, 'the Homer of Persia'. Among moderns, Gibbon must rely on d'Herbelot, the favourite author of this youth, and 'lament that [William Jones] has suspended the pursuit of Oriental learning' (which he had not for long¹⁵). The Greeks and Persians are alike ignorant of the geography of Eurasia, and do not know that 'those inaccessible regions are the ancient residence of a powerful and civilised nation', whose historical records look back over four thousand years and are maintained by an authoritative and bureaucratised historiography nearly half as old. Gibbon had indirect knowledge of the Chinese dynastic histories through the work of de Guignes, and a little more directly through the translations and epitomes of the mainly French Jesuits, 'now deposited in the king of France's library'. How much time he was able to give to reading them in 1777 we have to guess, but his footnotes cite the authority of 'Sematsien' (Ssuma Ch'ien or Sima Qian in our transliterations) in the first century BC, 'Pankou' (Pan Ku or Ban Gu) in the century after him, and a millennium later 'Semakouang' (Ssuma Kuang or Sima Guang) who in 1084 AD compiled the great series of dynastic histories translated in abridgement by the Jesuit Father de Mailla.¹⁶ Gibbon therefore knew something of the major dynasties – Han, Tang, Song and the contemporary Qing in particular – but cannot be said to have studied the continuity and mutations of the Chinese imperial structure or the forces which drove and maintained it. That was not his concern; he went to Chinese historiography in search of the interactions between agricultural and urban China and the nomad peoples of the western frontiers, who sometimes entered the empire, became sinicised and set up dynasties of their own, but sometimes recoiled or were expelled from it, setting off chain reactions across the steppe whose effects might be felt as far away as Europe. The central figure in Gibbon's chosen narrative is the first-century Han emperor 'Vouti' (Wu-ti or Wu Di), credited with extending Chinese rule over non-Han peoples between the Yangtse river and Canton, and at the same time breaking up, by means

¹⁵ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 1033 and n. 20. For d'Herbelot see *EEG*, pp. 29–30.

¹⁶ pp. 1034 and nn. 23, 24; 1036, n. 34; 1039, n. 41.

both military and diplomatic, a powerful western confederacy of tribes known collectively as the Hsiungnu, whose sovereign chief bore the title of the Tanju.¹⁷ De Guignes, followed by Gibbon, believed that 'Hsiungnu' could be identified as 'Huns'¹⁸ and that the events of 'Vouti's' reign about 100 AD could be connected with the latter's appearance in Gothic eastern Europe 275 years later. To the historian of historiography the question is less whether this reading can be sustained than the reasons why eighteenth-century historians arrived at it and the problems with which it confronted them.

De Guignes and Gibbon held that the Hsiungnu confederacy fractured along several fault lines, one alliance of tribes being absorbed by China, another becoming tributary to the empire, and a third migrating westward, encouraged to do so by the Chinese policy of promoting another steppe confederacy, the Sienpi, to fill the spaces formerly occupied by the Huns.¹⁹ It is clear that this is a repetitive history; that of the Sienpi may repeat that of the Hsiungnu, and in due course we hear of the former's displacement by a third people named the Toba. Chinese frontier policy is therefore capable of setting off westward movement by its own acts, and Gibbon will make use of this possibility in future chapters. The immediate problem for both historians is whether the term 'Huns' can be used to provide a narrative of peoples and their movements connecting events of the first century AD with those of the fourth. Gibbon admits that no direct narrative is possible.

It is impossible to fill the dark interval of time which elapsed after the Huns of the Volga were lost in the eyes of the Chinese, and before they showed themselves to those of the Romans.²⁰

But something has clearly happened to carry the Huns and 'the eyes of the Chinese' as far west as the Volga, and we are aware of a history of Chinese imperial hegemonies in central Asia, one of which was exerting transformative power in Gibbon's own time. He believed that this history was not unknowable – 'M. de Guignes has skilfully traced the footsteps of the Huns through the vast deserts of Tartary' – but since written narratives were scarce, it must be constructed by means partly conjectural. In the first place, both historians held that nomad cultures were continuous, uniform and unchanging, so that what was known of the movements of one people might confidently be used to supply what was not known of those of another. In addition to this, nomad society was held to displace a characteristic which distinguished it from that of the European *barbaricum*

¹⁷ p. 1038 and nn. 37, 38. ¹⁸ pp. 1035, n. 27; 1040, nn. 44, 45. ¹⁹ pp. 1039–40.
²⁰ p. 1042.

and explained the persistence of names and identities even among peoples of diverse origins, so that the 'Huns' carried and perpetuated their name with them.

The political society of the ancient Germans has the appearance of a voluntary alliance of independent warriors. The tribes of Scythia, distinguished by the modern appellation of *Hords*, assume the form of a numerous and increasing family, which, in the course of successive generations, has been propagated from the same original stock. The meanest and most ignorant of the Tartars preserve with conscious pride the inestimable treasures of their genealogy, and, whatever distinctions of rank may have been introduced by the unequal distribution of pastoral wealth, they mutually respect themselves and each other as the descendants of the first founder of the tribe. The custom, which still prevails, of adopting the bravest and most faithful of the captives, may countenance the very probable suspicion that this extensive consanguinity is, in a great measure, legal and fictitious. But the useful prejudice which has obtained the sanction of time and opinion produces the effects of truth;²¹

and Gibbon goes on to explain that – since an oral culture cannot preserve its history but must remember its genealogies – the lineage heads of such a people possess an authority which resists, and in the pastoral condition prevents, the formation of anything that can be called an empire. He is relying here on a 'modern' but extra-European source: the French and English translations of a work by Abu'l Ghazi al Bahadur, a khan of Khwarezm in Iran, written in the seventeenth century.²² Though published as an *Histoire Genealogique* or a *General History of the Tartars* – a collective term – this is more genealogy than history in the European sense, and underwrites what Gibbon has been saying. Abu'l Ghazi says nothing about the Huns, whom he did not list among his ancestors and of whom he may have had no historic memory whatever. He is concerned to establish the genealogies of his own Uzbek chieftaincies and more generally of every khan claiming descent from Genghiz – as, says Gibbon, does every bearer of that title from the Crimea to China,²³ though the lineage of the Mongol conqueror has survived his transient empire. Nomad history has a present tense; China is currently ruled by the Manchu, a people still partly 'Tartar' in their culture, though sinicised under the name of the Qing dynasty. In de Guignes's view this meant little; in due course the Manchu would be expelled and revert to the steppe, and the unchanging patterns of nomad and Confucian culture would be resumed.²⁴ Gibbon does not seem to differ, but he illustrates the migratory patterns of the steppe by reference to the 'black Calmucks'

²¹ pp. 1030–1. ²² Abu'l Ghazi, 1730. Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1187.

²³ p. 1031 and n. 13. ²⁴ *BSE*, pp. 142–3.

or 'Torgouts', a people who in 1771 had moved from Russian territory to return to the protection of the Qing.²⁵ In a later volume Gibbon will recognise that Petrine Russia and Manchu China have between them conquered the steppe and are reducing it to cultivation, commerce and competition between empires;²⁶ the age of the nomads as a force shaping world history is at an end. In chapter 26, however, he is concerned with the impact of the Huns upon Europe, which he thinks has been removed from myth to be related as authentic history. Since it was not written by Huns themselves, or by any literate observer who knew more about it than did Ammianus, it must remain in part conjectural; but Abu'l Ghazi's genealogical history, written about the phenomena of a millennium later, is enough to show us that the Huns who astonished the Goths must have been a formidable alliance of predatory tribes, not under the leadership of any imperial predecessor of Genghiz.²⁷ How these tribes shaped and invented themselves during the centuries of their way westward must be known largely by inference; and the khan of Khwarezm is a product of the history he wrote.

As they journey, or rather are intermittently propelled, towards the west, they encounter other peoples and are changed by the experience. A southern branch establish themselves on the eastern borders of the Persian empire, where they become something like the feudal lords of the agricultural Sogdians in what will be Abu'l Ghazi's 'Carizme'.²⁸ They are civilised, and even genetically improved, by the encounter with empire, and the Sassanids deal with them by the usual policies of war, treaty, commerce and acculturation. The northern Huns, traversing the Pontic steppe whose cold climate heightens their nomadic savagery, have a very different experience; they encounter peoples not unlike themselves, first the Alani and afterwards the Goths; and it is of the utmost importance to understand that they do not yet enter into direct contact with the Roman empire, whether as frontier barbarians or as invading conquerors. Their impact is devastating but indirect.

The Alani, plains-dwelling horsemen resembling the Sarmatians, are defeated by the Huns and conscripted as allies; some take refuge among the Germans and will reappear as far west as Gothic Spain.²⁹ Under Hun and Alanic attack, the Gothic hegemony of Hermanric disintegrates; the aged chieftain dies by his own hand or (moderns suggest) as a ritual sacrifice.³⁰ His successor Athanaric attempts a stand on the Dniester but is outflanked by fast-riding horsemen and retreats into the

²⁵ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 1040–1 and n. 51. ²⁶ Below, p. 497.

²⁷ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 1041. ²⁸ Ibidem. ²⁹ pp. 1043–4.

³⁰ P. 1045; Heather, 2005, p. 157.

Carpathian mountains, and two powerful confederations – the Tervingi who will be the Visigoths and the Greuthungi who will be the Ostrogoths – move south under their several leaders and offer themselves as immigrants to the Romans on the Danube.³¹ At this point Gibbon's history switches abruptly from the philosophic mode of de Guignes to the narrative mode of Ammianus Marcellinus, with the result, among others, that the Huns disappear for many chapters from a story now Gothic and Roman. We do not learn exactly why the Goths found them invincible, nor what they did in ensuing years in the lands the Goths had vacated. The grand patterns set up by de Guignes will recur in the coming volumes only when there are other movements in barbarian Europe which Gibbon thinks may also be traceable to disturbances in a Chinese galaxy long ago and far away.

(III)

In recent work on the historiography of Decline and Fall,³² it has appeared that de Guignes's 'Asian' thesis was set aside in the early nineteenth century, after attracting considerable interest in the eighteenth, in favour of a 'German' thesis that represented barbarian invaders, from Angles and Saxons in the island west to Visigoths and Ostrogoths in the Thracian east, as forming a *Völkerwanderung* of German peoples moving south from shared Baltic and Scandinavian origins to assail the frontiers of the Roman empire. To construct this macronarrative it was necessary to merge the *De moribus Germanorum* of Tacitus with the much later *De rebus Gothicis* of Jornandes,³³ compiled in sixth-century Constantinople, and so merge the Germans with the Goths; Gibbon in his tenth chapter had moved the Goths so far east that they became almost Scythian.³⁴ The thesis that the barbarian invaders formed a single ethno-linguistic group, German or Gothic, so that either term might be used of them all, was already established in the literature Gibbon was beginning to read on the history and geography of post-Roman Europe; and it is a little difficult to see why de Guignes's 'Asian' thesis should have been perceived as hostile to it. The Huns never settled within the empire; their function was to set the Goths in motion so that they could open its borders to the western Germanic peoples; and to dispute about the priority of Huns over Germans was to dispute the priority of cause over effect. Perhaps, however, the impulse to marginalise de Guignes and the Huns sprang from an

³¹ For his account of these events, pp. 1045–6. ³² Goffart, 2006, pp. 17–18.

³³ Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1230 (under Jordanes, Gibbon's invariable spelling of the name).

³⁴ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 259–60; see above, pp. 48–51.

impulse to present the *Völkerwanderung* as produced solely by the native virtues and energies of the *Deutsche Volk*; we may be faced with the beginnings of that romantic pan-German nationalism conspicuous in the long and often terrible history of the German intellect in modern Europe.³⁵ This nationalism has scarcely taken shape in Gibbon's mental world; he did not read German and there is no sign that he was aware of it.

There was, however, a version of the 'Asian' thesis more antique than any so far considered. The translator's preface to the English edition of Abu'l Ghazi declares that all the peoples of Europe were Tartars once, and that England in particular is 'no other than a Colony of *Tatars*'.³⁶ This has nothing to do with race or ethnicity, and little with the stages of social development. We are back in the world of Thomas Carte and James Parsons, with the sons of Japhet moving west under their leaders, Magog the shepherd and Gomer the tiller of the ground, to clear and settle the great Hercynian forest that covers post-diluvian western Europe.³⁷ The far more sophisticated de Guignes, still an adherent of the Mosaic history of mankind, imagined the population of Europe by nomad peoples moving west through a northern belt just below the permafrost, so that Scandinavia became a *lieu de passage* rather than a *pepinière des peuples*, in which incoming northerners constantly pressed settled peoples into a southward *grande migration*, towards the frontiers of the Roman empire.³⁸ It is not hard to see why Germans, and indeed Europeans generally, might reject this portrait of their ancestors as the perpetual victims of nomads from northern Asia; and there was already a scholarship which presented the post-Noachic barbarians of Europe as herdsmen on the move. 'Teutones' might appear a sub-species of 'Celtae', and James Macpherson had divided the ancient peoples into 'Celtae' and 'Sarmati', with the Germans a product of inter-marriage between the two.³⁹ We should not antedate the baleful influence of Tacitus and the German humanists.

Nevertheless, to write of migrations and a *Volkerwänderung*, as historians not only German were inclined to do, had nationalist implications insofar as it supposed peoples possessed of distinct identities, moved by forces arising either within or without themselves to seek settlement in new lands which increasingly lay within the Roman empire. When historians including Gibbon write of the Goths or Germans 'overthrowing' the empire or bringing about its 'fall', their language may bear these implications; but there were at least two ways in which it might move in other

³⁵ It was clearly Goffart's intention to resist a feared rebirth of this in the years after the reunification of Germany.

³⁶ Abu'l Ghazi, 1730, pp. iii–iv. ³⁷ *NCG*, pp. 357–61; Kidd, 1999; *BSE*, ch. 4.

³⁸ *BSE*, pp. 146–8. ³⁹ Macpherson, 1771, *passim*.

directions. In the first place, we have seen Gibbon disposed to suggest that Saxons or Alamanni constantly received volunteers from other Germanic groups, so that the name 'Alamanni' might denote nothing more than 'a voluntary alliance of independent warriors', such as German 'nations' normally were, lacking the genealogies which furnished the Tartar tribes with durable identities. To pursue this line of thought might end in presenting barbarian Europe not as an *officina gentium* but as a fluid and Cyclopean⁴⁰ world of wandering families, seeking leaders to follow and lands to cultivate wherever these might be found; and Gibbon's enquiry into the origins of such collective names as 'Alamanni'⁴¹ anticipates the vigorous debate over ethnicity and ethnogenesis which has played a large part in recent historiography.⁴²

This tendency was heightened by the propensity of ancient rhetoricians to present the barbarians of the frontiers alternately as savage hordes seeking land, loot and conquest, and as servile inferiors seeking shelter and service, offering themselves as mercenaries and colonists. There was an extensive literature of *deditio* and *receptio*, describing how wandering *gentes* might be received within the empire, after defeat or at their own petition, and assimilated to its culture subject to its authority. The 'barbarisation' of the armies came about largely in this manner. But Romans and their historians were well aware of the possible ambiguities of this process. The Cimbri and Teutones of the second century BC had appeared in arms demanding *receptio* as much as requesting it,⁴³ and when it was refused had invaded the empire to secure it for themselves, inflicting huge damage before they were destroyed. There was, in short, a scenario of barbarian invasion established in Roman literature before the climactic process took place. Beginning with the Goths of 375–8, there is to be a narrative of how *receptio* passed out of imperial control and took place on terms increasingly dictated by the barbarians themselves; the core narrative of the third volume of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*. But the barbarians have no intention of substituting their own culture, still less their empire, for the Roman; if they destroy Rome, it is by taking command of the process by which they become Romans. Both ancient and early modern writers, down to Gibbon himself, are capable of relating the ambiguities of this process; but they do so less by exploring its character than by employing an ambiguous rhetoric, in which the barbarians may appear anywhere along a scale of roles, ranging from abject refugees to conquering warriors. It is to be the tragedy of Valens's defeat that the

⁴⁰ *BSE*, pp. 47–9, 159–60. ⁴¹ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 272.

⁴² Goffart, 2006, index entries; Halsall, 2007, ch. 2.

⁴³ For a source for this Gibbon would have seen, see Mascov, 1738, I, p. 10.

Goths play both parts in it. But if the Goths and Germans destroy the Roman empire in order to become Romans themselves, it necessarily follows that the great modern debate as to whether the empire ‘fell’ or was ‘transformed’⁴⁴ was inherent in Latin historiography at all points in its journey from ancient to modern. Always implicit, it became explicit at moments in its writing; and the problem for the student of Gibbon’s text is to decide how (and how far) he asserted control over its ambiguity.

(IV)

From the moment when the Goths appear on the Danube, Gibbon abandons the *peinture* of peoples to pursue a *récit* of Roman history based on Ammianus, following him as closely as usual to the point where he terminates his work, and then going past it to the elevation of Theodosius as emperor. To a considerable extent, then, Gibbon is operating within the conventions of classical historiography, but there is the difference that while Ammianus knew he was narrating an unprecedented disaster, Gibbon could perceive its consequences, leading to Decline and Fall, and must read these into Ammianus’s narrative in ways that the latter could not. There are questions to be asked, then, about Gibbon’s construction of the history he is following. To begin with, how does he arrive at the statement that the Tervingi and Greuthungi presented themselves to the Romans as peoples migrating with their flocks and families, in flight from nomad raiders with whose tactics they are unable to contend? There is no mention of any massive defeat of Goths by Huns, and the latter do no more than precipitate a crisis in Gothic history. ‘Against these enemies’, whose terrifying character Gibbon has just described in the language of Ammianus,

Hermanric prepared to exert the united forces of the Gothic state; but he soon discovered that his vassal tribes, provoked by oppression, were much more inclined to second than to repel the invasion of the Huns.⁴⁵

‘The Gothic state’ disintegrates so quickly that we may wonder whether it was anything more than a hegemony of mobile tribes, not unlike those intermittently set up on the nomad steppe. Its fragments retreat in various directions; but the chieftains of the Tervingi and Greuthungi manage to lead their peoples to seek *receptio*, on a scale far exceeding any the Romans have had to deal with before.⁴⁶ We are not told – perhaps the historians are telling us they did not know – just how and why migration on this scale

⁴⁴ Kagan, 1978, for an anthology of readings from recent historians.

⁴⁵ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 1044.

⁴⁶ Or indeed at any time in recorded history; *ibid.*, p. 1047.

occurred; but the two peoples appear, not only in numbers the Roman state can hardly manage, but in the double role of trembling fugitives begging for refuge, and of organised armies capable of doing battle with the Roman legions. It was a convention of Roman historiography that barbarians should oscillate between the extremes of aggressiveness and servility; but the Goths arrive as armed peoples in retreat from enemies never very clearly shown in action, and prove to be a field force capable of destroying the main army of the eastern Roman empire. There is more here than the conventional historiography can explain, but whether Ammianus, or Gibbon, possessed the resources outside rhetorical narrative capable of explaining it is another question. They seem to have lacked – meaning that they did not receive from Jornandes – any description of Gothic social or military organisation at the moment of the Hunnic impact; but if we had it we should still be asking why the Goths could not defeat the Huns but could defeat the Romans.

What we receive from Ammianus and Gibbon is an *histoire événementielle* of bad decisions, having short-term causes but long-term consequences, as is common enough in most historiographies. The mis-handling of the Gothic reception is initially the result of corruption among frontier officers military and civil, but increasingly displays the Roman determination, which the Goths resist, to make *receptio* as far as possible a *deditio* – Gibbon does not use these terms – with the Goths being disarmed and dispersed as the price of settlement. Since they have not been defeated by Romans, or as far as can be told by Huns, they retain both their arms and their capacity for self-mobilisation, and a point is reached where they are living off the country in Thrace and Macedonia, though unable to attack the fortified cities⁴⁷ or demand ransom from them. This is not unlike the problem Julian encountered in Gaul, but its magnitude demands the personal attention of the emperor. Valens is in Antioch, preoccupied with a near war with the Persians over Armenia; he makes a hasty peace – the Persians hold the cards and are willing to grant it – and sets out with his main force to deal with the Gothic rebellion, or invasion. It is significant that he needs reinforcement from his western colleague Gratian, the young son of the late Valentinian, who is dealing with an incursion of Alamanni; Gibbon gives no hint of any connection between their moves and those of the Goths. Gratian repels them and punishes them by wasting their country, but this delays his intervention in the eastern crisis, which has now reached the point of a drawn battle near the mouths of the Danube⁴⁸ and the intervention of a lesser Gothic tribe

⁴⁷ p. 1054. ⁴⁸ The battle *Ad Salices*, pp. 1054–5.

(the Taifalae).⁴⁹ Instead of waiting for Gratian – there is not much sign that the Gothic chiefs wished to bring matters to a head – Valens gives battle near Adrianople and is destroyed together with two-thirds of his army, the principal force of the eastern empire. Gibbon has nothing to say here about the degeneration and effeminacy of the Roman army; the surrounded legions fight to the last. It is a greater disaster than Cannae.⁵⁰ Fritigern the Goth is not Hannibal, but an army based on trans-frontier recruitment cannot display the almost mythic capacity for self-renewal attributed to the Romans of the *senatus populusque*.

This turning point in late Roman history is one in the history of historiography. Ammianus Marcellinus terminated his history at the aftermath of Adrianople – a series of planned massacres by Romans of Gothic hostage populations in the cities of Asia – and Gibbon was deprived, not only of a master guide whose narrative he had been following since midpoint in the reign of Constantius, but of a style and manner of historiography on which he could base his own. In a footnote he observed that ‘Ammianus was the last subject of Rome who composed a profane history in the Latin language’,⁵¹ and he was now deprived of that Latin blend of rhetoric with narrative which had so profoundly affected early modern historiography, including his own, since at latest the fifteenth century. His sources from now on were: the Greek Zosimus, a ‘profane’ historian whom he repeatedly says he despises but must use;⁵² ecclesiastical historians whose concerns and values were other than his; the ‘barbarian’ historians just coming into view with Jordanes; the Byzantine Procopius; and a handful of moderns attempting an ethnography of post-Roman Europe. The great Enlightened theorists of the history of society were invaluable for macronarrative and metanarrative, but not for furnishing the story of what happened, least of all as historians still early modern in their assumptions understood the need for one. Gibbon removes his *éloge* for Ammianus from the footnotes to the text, and remarks that he, who

terminates his useful work with the defeat and death of Valens, recommends the more glorious subject of the ensuing reign to the youthful vigour and eloquence of the rising generation.

⁴⁹ For their unnatural customs, p. 1058, and their defeat and *deditio*, p. 1061. Gibbon’s narrative may be summarised to the point of abbreviation, since it does not here go in search of causes or reflections. He does remark here that the Goths were joined by several hordes of Huns and by discontented workmen and peasants from the populations within the empire.

⁵⁰ p. 1064. ⁵¹ p. 1074, n. 114.

⁵² ‘Zosimus, whom we are now reduced to cherish’ (p. 1067, n. 98), ‘is curious and copious’ (p. 1070, n. 103).

Here a footnote gives Ammianus's conclusion in the original Latin and in full. But:

The rising generation was not disposed to accept his advice, or to imitate his example; and, in the study of the reign of Theodosius, we are reduced to illustrate the partial narrative of Zosimus –

whose paganism never induced Gibbon to admire him –

by the obscure hints of fragments and chronicles, by the figurative style of poetry or panegyric, and by the precarious assistance of the ecclesiastical writers, who, in the heat of religious faction, are apt to despise the profane virtues of sincerity and moderation. Conscious of these disadvantages, which will continue to involve a considerable portion of the decline and fall of the Roman empire, I shall proceed with doubtful and timorous steps.⁵³

The reign of Theodosius, and the process of decline and fall, will take place as much in the domain of ecclesiastical as of imperial history; but that is only one of the reasons why Gibbon must now take a decisive step away from rhetorical and towards critical historiography. Bereft of the rhetoric which sometimes left arcana and causation unexplained, he must construct his own narratives of events, sometimes by disentangling them from obscure and misleading sources.⁵⁴ It is no accident that the passage just quoted leads straight into an expression of doubt whether the reign of Theodosius was as glorious as sometimes presented, and an explanation of the setting and context in which that emperor had to act.

How he came to be emperor is the first event Gibbon has to relate⁵⁵ and the first problem he has to explore, as he advances without Ammianus as guide and master. Gratian in the west has problems of his own, and must look for an eastern colleague to confront disaster. It falls, however, to him and his ministers to find one. The eastern army has been destroyed at Adrianople, and nothing whatever is said of the Mesopotamian or Armenian frontiers, where we might expect legions and their generals to play some part in choosing a successor; nor do we hear anything of a Persian response to Adrianople. The search is conducted in the west, and falls – surely more mysteriously than Gibbon has occasion to tell us – on the younger Theodosius, son of Valentinian's general, who after playing a worthy part in his father's campaigns, has been allowed to live quietly on his estates in northern Spain since that officer's never-explained

⁵³ pp. 1073–4.

⁵⁴ He inserts here (pp. 1067–9) a general critique of the historians he must now use, during which he reverts to the contrast of human-causes and natural disasters, by censuring Jerome's claim that Gothic devastation caused reafforestation and a shortage of fish in the Danube. Modern readers, environmentally sensitive, may wish to revisit this passage.

⁵⁵ pp. 1070–3.

execution. There is clearly a story here which we are not being told, since the second Theodosius – ‘a name celebrated in history and dear to the Catholic Church’⁵⁶ – is suddenly summoned to Gratian’s court at Sirmium and presented to the legions as a new Augustus. The armies accept him and no rival appears as yet, something which even in the desperate circumstances of 379 requires more explanation than Gibbon gives. Theodosius is almost a late-antique Cincinnatus; Gibbon observes that he was neither bred in the palace nor elevated by the soldiers, and goes on to a lengthy panegyric of his noble qualities, which give him an ‘important resemblance to the best and greatest of the Roman princes’.⁵⁷ Rhetoric is still playing its role in historiography, and Gibbon devotes space to a long translation of Libanius’s ‘funeral oration of a vanquished army and of an unpopular prince’, which he agrees is no more than a panegyric though it deserves respect for its generosity.⁵⁸ It fills a need which Ammianus has left unsatisfied.

Rhetoric recedes, however, as Gibbon goes on to study how Theodosius dealt with the terrifying problems that confronted him as he assumed command in the east. The army of the *comitatenses* – not that Gibbon uses such terms here – has been destroyed with Valens; but the barbarians (who now include gangs of Alani and even Huns) find that they cannot breach the walls of Adrianople and Constantinople, the strength of which compensates for the weakness of the surviving troops who garrison them.⁵⁹ While the Goths busy themselves in looting and devastating the estates of Thrace and Macedonia – often with the support of rebellious slaves and workers – Theodosius has to rebuild an army out of demoralised and unpromising survivors. He does this, first by encouraging them to hold the towns the barbarians lack the means to assault; second, by encouraging the garrisons to venture on small-scale operations in the field. These are Fabian tactics, aimed at restoring morale, discipline and elementary tactics, and the parallel is duly drawn with the action or inaction of the great Cunctator after Cannae; in language that recalls Machiavelli, we hear that they were ‘the work of prudence, rather than of valour; the prudence of Theodosius was seconded by fortune’.⁶⁰ Yet, says Gibbon immediately after conceding that he must ‘proceed with doubtful and timorous steps’,

I may boldly pronounce that the battle of Hadrianople was never revenged by any signal or decisive victory of Theodosius over the barbarians; and the expressive silence of his venal orators may be confirmed by the observation of the conditions and circumstances of the times,

⁵⁶ p. 1071. ⁵⁷ pp. 1072–3. ⁵⁸ pp. 1065–6. ⁵⁹ pp. 1066–7. ⁶⁰ p. 1076.

of which rhetorical historiography does not present anything like the full picture.⁶¹ Chapter 26 is moving towards recognition that even Theodosius could not avoid taking a step which would prove fatal to the empire; but to see what this was, we must look again at the condition and circumstances of the Goths within the empire after the defeat of Valens. They were there at all because they had sought acceptance within it; the battle of Adrianople and the devastation of Thrace were extreme measures, almost civil wars, by which they aimed to become part of the empire, not to destroy it; but it was looking as if they had done so much damage that they could not achieve their own aims. Where was the empire within which they might settle? They were a loose alliance of migratory tribes, with no stable leadership. Fritigern had disappeared in unknown circumstances;⁶² Athanaric, reappearing from his Carpathian refuge, was received at Constantinople with his following and soon afterwards died.⁶³ In the last footnote of this chapter and indeed this volume, Gibbon is indignant with Montesquieu for having written in the *Grandeur et Decadence des Romains* that the Goths ‘ne repassèrent le Danube que pour abandonner l’affreuse solitude qu’ils avoient faite’;⁶⁴ he seemed ‘ignorant’, says Gibbon, ‘that the Goths, after the defeat of Valens, never abandoned the Roman territory’. But it is not clear that Montesquieu meant to suggest any re-emigration by the Goths as a single people; and Gibbon, in the chapter he is here concluding, relates at some length⁶⁵ how the Ostrogoths, still led by Alatheus and Saphrax, who had conducted them across the Danube in 376, headed westward, ‘advanced into the unknown countries of the North; and after an interval of more than four years, returned with accumulated force to the banks of the lower Danube’. Here they attempted an armed crossing into Roman territory, but were met by a line of anchored warships which destroyed their canoes in mid-stream. We should not say ‘the Goths’, it is clear, as if we were speaking of a single entity. What mattered was the Goths within the empire, demanding shelter, offering service, but imposing in arms the terms on which they should have both.

Montesquieu’s ‘error is inexcusable; since it disguises the principal and immediate cause of the fall of the Western empire of Rome’.⁶⁶ These are

⁶¹ p. 1074. Recent historians (Williams and Friell, 1994, pp. 31–2; Heather, 2005, p. 188) suppose that Theodosius was defeated in battle by the Goths in western Macedonia during 380. It is obvious that he did not bring them to surrender and *deditio*, since there would have been no recognition of them as *foederati* had he been victorious.

⁶² p. 1076. ⁶³ pp. 1077–8.

⁶⁴ Montesquieu, *Oeuvres Complètes de Montesquieu* 2, ed. Weil and Courtney, 2000, p. 232.

⁶⁵ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 1078–80. ⁶⁶ p. 1083, n. 136.

the last words of volume II of the *Decline and Fall*, which is concluding with a demonstration why the valiant and prudent Theodosius cannot avoid, as a consequence of the destruction of an army he can never quite replace, taking the fatal step of solving the problem of armed Goths at liberty within the empire by means of a treaty between independent actors. Their settlement as *foederati* in the eastern empire is ‘the principal and immediate cause of the fall of the Western empire’; but the narrative of how this resulted will take several chapters. Meanwhile there are less immediate causes to be recounted. The full text of the treaty is lacking:

The original treaty, which fixed the settlement of the Goths, ascertained their privileges, and stipulated their obligations, would illustrate the history of Theodosius and his successors. The series of their history has imperfectly preserved the spirit and substance of this singular agreement. The ravages of war and tyranny—

Gibbon is thinking of depopulation as a result of over-taxation —

had provided many large tracts of fertile but uncultivated land for the use of those barbarians who might not disdain the practice of agriculture . . . The barbarians would have deserved to feel the cruel and perfidious policy of the Imperial court if they had suffered themselves to be dispersed through the provinces. They required and they obtained the sole possession of the villages and districts assigned for their residence; they still cherished and propagated their native manners and language; asserted, in the bosom of despotism, the freedom of their domestic government —

barbarism, like religion, can be a force making for liberty —

and acknowledged the sovereignty of the emperor, without submitting to the inferior jurisdiction of the laws and magistrates of Rome.

Gibbon might almost be following here the judgement and language of Tillemont, which runs:

Il eust été à se souhaiter que l’on eust dispersé ces barbares en divers endroits, pour en estre tout à fait maistre; au lieu qu’il paroist par la suite de l’histoire qu’ils estoient assez réunis en un mesme lieu, et que dans les armées ils faisoient un corps à part sous les chefs de leur nation; ce que fust la source de tous les maux qu’ils causerent. Mais il y a assez sujet de croire que ces barbares qui connoissoient l’avarice, l’injustice, les violences et l’infidélité des officiers Romains, refuserent absolument de se mettre à leur discretion, et ne voulurent consentir à la paix qu’à condition de demeurer toujours unis ensemble.⁶⁷

[It might be wished that these barbarians had been dispersed in various regions, to keep them under strict control; instead of which it appears from the history following that they were always united in a single area and in the armies formed

⁶⁷ Tillemont, *Empereurs*, v, p. 95.

a separate corps under commanders of their own nation, which was the source of all the ills which they afterwards caused. But there is good reason to suppose that the barbarians, knowing well the avarice, injustice, violence and infidelity of the Roman governors, refused absolutely to submit to their discretion, and would make peace only on condition of remaining at all times united.]

Gibbon continues:

The hereditary chiefs of the tribes and families –

these prove to exist among Germans as well as nomads –

were still permitted to command their followers in peace and war; but the royal dignity was abolished; and the generals of the Goths were appointed and removed at the pleasure of the emperor. An army of forty thousand men was maintained for the perpetual service of the empire of the East; and those haughty troops . . . assumed the title of *Foederati*, or allies . . . Their native courage was improved by the use of arms and the knowledge of discipline; and while the republic was guarded or threatened by the doubtful sword of the barbarians, the last sparks of the military flame were finally extinguished in the minds of the Romans.⁶⁸

Barbarism, like the church, is a republic within the empire; one at least will terminate its existence by taking it over. In each case, however, the process will be ambivalent; Goths and Christians will become more integrated into Roman civility as they displace or usurp the authority of its empire. The opening chapters of Gibbon's third volume will show Theodosius establishing a Trinitarian orthodoxy which will claim a moral and redemptive authority over his own actions; they will conclude at the accession of his heirs, who are unable to control the actions of the Gothic (and Arian) *foederati*. Whether the latter are acting as barbarian invaders or as competitors for authority within a disintegrating central system is a question leading to that of the fall or transformation of the empire. For the present, Gibbon's language seems to suggest that 'the Goths' are exercising military power because 'the Romans' have lost the capacity to exercise any of their own, but he has dwelt on the real possibility that the *foederati* will become functioning members of the empire within which they desire to live. That this does not happen may be a matter of accident; Theodosius does not leave a successor capable of managing his inheritance. The last words of the passage just quoted do indeed suggest something more; the Romans are dependent on barbarians, recruited to the armies or exercising their own power, because they cannot supply soldiers from their own society and culture. But this may be a long-term rather than an immediate diagnosis. Gibbon's references include⁶⁹

⁶⁸ For all these passages, see pp. 1080–1. ⁶⁹ p. 1081, n. 131.

the later oration *De Regno* by Synesius, the philosopher bishop of Cyrene, whom he will quote elsewhere as calling for an army of peasants and citizens defending their own homes.⁷⁰ He knows, as Synesius probably did, that this is nostalgia for what is no longer possible. It is his long-range explanation of the Decline and Fall that since Augustus, since Severus, since the Illyrians, since Diocletian, and now again with Theodosius, the Romans have ceased being a militia defending their *res publica* and *imperium*, and have increasingly relied on the armies of the frontiers and recruited from them and their marchlands. It is now a question whether the recruitment of barbarians to these armies can be kept under imperial control; but the question remains open, and Gibbon knows that it will remain open for a long time. The immediate narrative will relate successive attempts to answer it; but the triumph of religion asserts a prior claim to Gibbon's attention and ours, and will occupy several chapters, reopening the question of the relation between imperial history and ecclesiastical.

⁷⁰ Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1265. Cf. p. 342 of this volume.

Part V

The Triumph of Orthodoxy
and the Last Emperor

14 The reign of Theodosius: triumphs preceding disaster

(I)

The two chapters opening Gibbon's third volume are in fact the story of an ending. They narrate the reign of the last effective emperor.

The genius of Rome expired with Theodosius, the last of the successors of Augustus and Constantine who appeared in the field at the head of their armies, and whose authority was universally acknowledged throughout the whole extent of the empire.¹

These words open chapter 29, in which Gibbon will begin narrating how it came about that there was never again a militarily effective single emperor, and that the western and eastern empires failed to co-operate and so failed to deal with the problem of barbarian incursions. The latter failure leads his narrative to Decline and Fall in the conventional sense of the disintegration of empire in the western provinces; but we inescapably look back to the recent disastrous defeat of an eastern emperor as the 'immediate cause' of this process. Gibbon has already begun to relate this story; chapter 26 at the end of volume II has narrated the first actions of Theodosius's reign as leading to the treaty of 382 which recognised the Goths as *foederati* capable of action within the empire. Chapter 29 will take up this theme as leading to the disasters of Decline and Fall; but chapters 27 and 28 are concerned with other narratives. They present Theodosius and others as actors in ecclesiastical history, and in the broader history of the impact of Christianity on Roman empire and society. Here they seem to bring to an end the empire's involvement in the great debate over Jesus Christ as the Son of God which began at the Council of Nicaea, and to leave both halves of the empire secure in a Trinitarian orthodoxy which has taken its place; and Gibbon is asking whether this did not leave the Christian clergy more independent than before of the authority of empire, and – paradoxically, given Theodosius's role in the establishment of

¹ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 98.

orthodoxy – more capable of exercising authority over it. Ambrose, bishop of Milan, who brings Theodosius to public penance over the massacre at Thessalonica, is a figure who dominates the story in chapter 27 as no churchman has since Athanasius, or will again in Gibbon's third volume.

It follows that in this chapter ecclesiastical history – which relates its own narratives according to its own canons – has to be more closely co-ordinated with the history of empire than in any preceding chapter, and seems at times to have annexed it. Empire, however, has its own problems and relates its own history; and a prominent role in chapter 27 is played by the problem with which Gibbon's history of empire began: that of protecting the imperial succession against weak or delinquent heirs and interventions by ambitious provincial commanders. Theodosius, a westerner secure only in his eastern empire, has to fight two civil wars (it is Gibbon's term for them) against challengers from the west, and the ultimate failure of his reign is that he dies leaving two heirs competent in neither west nor east; at which point the climactic Decline and Fall begins.

Several themes therefore interact to make chapter 27, which relates his reign from 380 to its end in 395, a specimen of that multiplicity of narratives which the *Decline and Fall* is becoming. But before the central narrative (however we define it) is resumed in chapter 29, Gibbon's pattern presents one more face. Theodosius's triumph of orthodoxy appears in two forms: the extinction within the empire of the complex of positions collectively if imprecisely known as 'Arianism', and the simultaneous extinction, by an imperially imposed Christian worship, of the complex of ancient practices known with even greater imprecision as 'paganism'. Gibbon – we shall find that he is not alone in this – separates the two triumphs altogether, after initially presenting them as sequential. Triumph over 'Arianism' is related in chapter 27 under the head of ecclesiastical (and imperial) history; that over 'paganism' in chapter 28, where – although Christian ecclesiastics and monastics obviously play a large part in it – Gibbon describes it as an event in 'the history of the human mind'² and seeks to relate it in the language of Enlightened philosophical history. The extinction of paganism, however, turns out to be a major, and extremely paradoxical, event in the history of Christianity, and is related by both ecclesiastical and philosophical historians in their own terms; so that it presents us with a new set of problems in the understanding of how Gibbon composed the mosaic of narratives which we increasingly see him as fitting together. A separate chapter in this volume, as well as in Gibbon's, becomes necessary, but the reign of Theodosius, as Gibbon sees it, must come first.

² *Ibid.*, p. 71.

(II)

Gibbon opens chapter 27 with an account of the reign of Gratian in the west of the empire, from his role in the choice of Theodosius as eastern emperor to his death in the usurpation of Maximus in 383. The function of this account seems limited to a study of the problems of training an heir presumptive as a young man. Gratian, who appeared to be doing well enough during the Gothic crisis before and after Theodosius's accession, is now said to have merely acted as his counsellors advised him and to have relapsed into the habits of a playboy once they left the scene, with the result that – though it is emphasised that he was not a Nero or a Commodus³ – the armies cease to respect him, and he is easily overthrown by Maximus, the rebellious governor of Britain. Though this is the first major usurpation of the purple by a provincial general since Julian rose against Constantius twenty years before, Gibbon says that 'it is not very important to enquire from what causes the revolt of Britain was produced'⁴ – as if such things happened from time to time, and the precariousness of the imperial structure at its apex was inherent. Nor does he tell us who Gratian's counsellors had been or whether they had advocated any particular policy. He says indeed that

the conscience of the credulous prince was directed by saints and bishops –

Jerome, Martin of Tours, Ambrose of Milan –

who procured an Imperial edict to punish, as a capital offence, the violation, the neglect, or even the ignorance of the divine law.⁵

But this, whose source is given in a footnote as the Code of Justinian,⁶ is no more than standard anti-clericalism; churchmen are always representing princely authority as divine, when they are not engaged in undermining it. Gibbon does not explore the complex relations and competitions between western homoousians, Illyrian homoians, and the powerful churches of the east; he notes only later that Ambrose composed, apparently at Gratian's request, an exposition of the doctrine of the Trinity, into which that of the Son was being enlarged.⁷ These matters play no part in his treatment of Gratian's not inconsiderable reign. What does concern him is that at Gratian's death at the hands of defecting

³ p. 21.

⁴ p. 22. Cf. p. 23, where Maximus's expedition is 'long afterwards remembered as the emigration of a considerable part of the British nation', the authority for this being Archbishop Ussher. Gibbon adds (n. 13) a facetious account of the accompanying legend of St Ursula.

⁵ p. 20. ⁶ *Ibid.*, n. 5. ⁷ *Ibid.*, n. 4 and p. 41.

soldiers, Theodosius saw fit to accept, at least *de facto*, the offer of a tripartite empire, in which Maximus was to control the provinces beyond the Alps – Britain, Gaul and Spain – Valentinian II Italy, western Illyria and Africa, and Theodosius the east. The rule of conjoint Augusti is back in view as a solution to the imperial problem; so may be the cartography of a future Europe. Gibbon observes that Maximus's share of empire comprised the seats of the three most powerful monarchies of his own time.⁸

The three emperors are not immediately rivals, but their relations are governed by their respective insecurities. Maximus is a usurper dependent on his armed power; Valentinian is an immature prince governed by his counsellors and, rather importantly, his mother. Theodosius has recently assumed command of the east, and is engaged in reasserting empire after the disaster of Adrianople. What is remarkable about his reign, and gives chapter 27 its remarkable character, is that before the fall of Gratian in 383, and before he completes the settlement with the Goths dated 382, he feels able to impose a Nicene orthodoxy on the churches subject to his empire, and in fact succeeds in doing so, with momentous consequences for both imperial and ecclesiastical history. Gibbon is obliged to tell two stories together, and his narrative in chapter 27 covers events occurring at the same time as those he has related in chapter 26, as well as those in the later chapter which recount the fall of Gratian. He has so far preferred, and he is still trying, to keep the imperial and ecclesiastical narratives as far apart as possible; but he now writes of Theodosius:

Before he again took the field against the Goths, he received the sacrament of baptism from Acholius, the orthodox bishop of Thessalonica; and as the emperor ascended from the holy font, still glowing with the warm feelings of regeneration –

Gibbon's tone may be ironic; the substance of his words is not –

he dictated a solemn edict, which proclaimed his own faith, and prescribed the religion of his subjects. 'It is our pleasure (such is the Imperial style) that all the nations which are governed by our clemency and moderation should stedfastly⁹ adhere to the religion which was taught by St Peter to the Romans, which faithful tradition has preserved, and which is now professed by the pontiff Damasus, and by Peter, bishop of Alexandria, a man of apostolic holiness. According to the disciple of the Apostles, and the doctrine of the Gospel, let us believe the sole deity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, under an equal majesty and a pious Trinity.'¹⁰

This edict, dated from Thessalonica in 380, has two characteristics signalling historical change. In the first place it is both homoousian and Trinitarian. The creed of Nicaea had of course been Trinitarian from the

⁸ p. 45. ⁹ Gibbon's spelling. ¹⁰ pp. 26–27.

start, and Gibbon in chapter 21 had explored the Platonic origins of the doctrine; but all debate hitherto had been between definitions of the nature of the Son and Gibbon had not felt obliged to enter on the definition of the Spirit. In his own time, the controversy among Trinitarians, Arians, Socinians, Unitarians like Priestley and others, had been and was overwhelmingly about the nature of the Son and the person of Christ, and the almost immediately political debate between grace and law which the need to understand the Incarnation entailed. Gibbon writing chapter 27 in 1777–81 may already have been collecting material for the history of doctrine about Christ's nature which he published as chapter 47 in 1788. It was the Son that concerned him, not the Spirit; perhaps another reason for situating him in a Moderate, not a Radical, Enlightenment.

Whatever his reasons, Gibbon in chapter 27 gives no history of Trinitarian doctrine. He deals with it only ten chapters later,¹¹ when he has something to say of the theological debates and persecutions that occurred in post-Donatist and even post-Augustinian Africa following its occupation by the Arian Vandals. Here he questions the authenticity of two great Trinitarian texts: the Athanasian Creed and the verse in St John's Gospel which declares that the three persons of the Trinity bear witness to it in heaven.¹² His scholarship on the latter in particular has been rightly studied at length as displaying 'the autonomy of history',¹³ that is of critical method; but we are left without an explanation of why the advent of the Trinity plays no part in his narrative chapters equivalent to that he has recounted of the advent of the Son. Perhaps he felt that there was nothing to add to his Leclercian demonstration of the circularity into which the human intellect must fall when it attempted to explore the incomprehensible mystery of God's being;¹⁴ a demonstration leading equally to his own scepticism and to the embrace of mystery by faith. All he has to say of the theology of the Council of Constantinople, convened by Theodosius in 381, is

The vehement disputes of the fourth century had been chiefly employed on the nature of the Son of God; and the various opinions which were embraced concerning the *Second*, were extended, by a natural analogy, to the *Third* person of the Trinity, a clear refusal to enter on the complexities of debate. There was more than analogy involved.

Yet it was found, or it was thought necessary, by the victorious adversaries of Arianism, to explain the ambiguous language of some respectable doctors; to

¹¹ Ch. 37; Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 435–44. ¹² pp. 441–3. ¹³ Levine, 1999.

¹⁴ Above, pp. 90–92.

confirm the faith of the catholics; and to condemn an unpopular and inconsistent sect,

the followers of Macedonius, consubstantialist as to the Son but hesitant as to the Spirit,

A final and unanimous sentence was pronounced to ratify the equal Deity of the Holy Ghost; the mysterious doctrine has been received by all the nations, and all the churches of the Christian world; and their grateful reverence has assigned to the bishops of Theodosius the second rank among the general councils.¹⁵

That held at Nicaea established the full divinity of the Son, at the price of a half-century of schisms and heresies in which the emperors were from the start involved. That at Constantinople established one sacred and universal church, at the command of the last emperor to reign effectively in east and west; barbarism might have weakened his authority, but religion had not. The consequences of Constantinople were the opposite of those of Nicaea; no storm of heresies followed; and it is this which renders remarkable the strongly Roman and Latin language of Theodosius's edict. We have grown used to thinking of a western church resolutely Nicene in its theology and maintaining its position in defiant independence of Constantius or Valens; an eastern church divided by many non-homoousian doctrines collectively known as 'Arian', and generally in alliance with emperors based in the east and preferring diversity and even toleration as more compatible with their civil authority. Here is Theodosius the westerner, none too secure in his empire in the east, invoking the apostle Peter, the bishop of Rome and Athanasius's successor exiled from Alexandria, in imposing an uncompromising Trinitarianism on eastern churches he does not yet control. Gibbon and his readers are bound to look ahead to the medieval papacy and the schism of the eastern and western churches; the immediate question, however, is how Theodosius came to resolve on this course of action and why he was as successful in it as proved to be the case. Had the disasters of 376–8 weakened the eastern bishops as much as they had the eastern emperor? There seems little reason to think so.

Tillemont, always Gibbon's principal adversary and yet authority in matters of this kind, has Theodosius at his accession learning from Acholius of Thessalonica that while the western churches are reliably Trinitarian and obedient, those of the east are dominated by Arian bishops who control the chief cities.¹⁶ The absolutist language of the edict of 380 cannot therefore be enforced, and it is better 'de tascher de les gagner par la douceur'.

¹⁵ Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 33–4. Gibbon's emphasis. ¹⁶ Tillemont, *Empereurs*, v, p. 87.

L'évenement semble avoir décidé en faveur de Theodose. Car il rétablit entièrement la foy Catholique, et abatit extrêmement les heretiques, non en forçant les peuples à abandonner leurs erreurs, mais en les portant peu à peu, et sur tout en se declarant hautement en faveur de la vraie foy.¹⁷

[The event seems to have declared in Theodosius's favour. For he restored the Catholic faith everywhere, and altogether cast down the heretics, not by forcing the peoples to abandon their errors, but by easing them along little by little, and above all by declaring himself openly a supporter of the true faith.]

When we consider Gibbon's account of Theodosius as ruling by intolerance and eliminating Arianism by means that may be termed persecution, Tillemont's words will be reconsidered; but before the latter reached it, he had given an account of the later history of Arianism bearing a very different significance. We turn to the sixth volume of the *Mémoires*, where he opens a chapter by declaring:

Nous voici arrivez à la penultieme année du regne et de la vie de Valens, qu'on peut dire avoir aussi esté la penultieme du regne de l'Arianisme parmi les Romains et dans l'Orient. Mais par un effet terrible des jugemens impenetrables de Dieu, dans le mesme temps que cette heresie alloit se ruiner parmi les Romains, elle infecta plusieurs peuples barbares, et les corrompt tellement, qu'elle se rendit par ce moyen maistresse de presque tout l'Occident, et s'y maintint triumpante jusqu'à la fin du VI siècle.¹⁸

[We have now arrived at the penultimate year of the reign of Valens, which may also be termed the penultimate of the reign of Arianism among the Romans and in the East. But by the terrible effect of God's inscrutable judgements, at the same time as this heresy came to destroy itself among the Romans, it infected several barbarous peoples and so far corrupted them that it made itself mistress of almost all the west, and there remained triumphant to the end of the sixth century],

the point at which both Tillemont and Le Clerc intended to conclude their histories. In Tillemont's mind, the disaster of the Gothic invasion was that it brought about a triumph of barbarism and heresy: the establishment of Arian kingdoms by Goths in Italy, Aquitaine and Spain, and by Vandals in Africa. Gibbon was by no means unaware of them, but saw no need to relate the reigns of Valens and Theodosius as marking their origin; in his mind the reign of Theodosius was the triumph of orthodoxy. He postponed the barbaric Arianism of the west to a chapter near the end of his third volume, where as we shall see it appears as one of several essays brought together to effect a conclusion. To Tillemont the Arianism of the Goths, no less than their barbarism, was the key to – very nearly the cause of – the disaster of Adrianople.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* ¹⁸ *Mémoires*, VI, p. 604.

ce qui rend cet evenement encore plus digne d'étonnement, c'est que l'Evesque Ulfilas, qui fut en ce point l'instrument de la grande colere de Dieu, sembloit ne pouvoir estre l'instrument que de sa misericorde, moins encore par son ministere que par les dons extraordinaires dont Dieu l'avoit comblé et par les merveilles qu'il avoit operées par luy.¹⁹

[What renders this event yet more worthy of our astonishment is that the bishop Ulfilas, who was in this matter the instrument of God's wrath, seems to have been rather the instrument of his mercy, less by his preaching than by the extraordinary powers which God had bestowed upon him and by the marvelous acts which God worked through him.]

Ulfilas, the apostle of the Goths, who carried Christianity to them in the Arian form he had learned in the eastern empire, is now the subject of a history of the most Jansenist kind. On the one hand

Il a esté assez malheureux pour corrompre la foy de tous les peuples du Nord, et y introduire l'Arianisme.²⁰

[he was so unfortunate as to corrupt the faith of all the peoples of the North, and to introduce Arianism there.]

On the other

Il amplifia mesme beaucoup la religion de son pays, et y introduit une police plus douce et moins barbare. Il se signala encore en s'exposant à une infinité de dangers pour la conversion de ces peuples. De plus, il leur inventa des lettres, dont les caracteres se voient encore aujourd'hui en quelques endroits, et traduit toute la bible en leur langue, afin qu'ils l'apprirent; hormis les livres des Rois, ayant peur que la lecture de tant de guerres et de combats dont ils sont remplis n'enflammast encore ces peuples à une chose pour laquelle ils n'avoient déjà que trop d'inclination et d'ardeur. Il ne faut pas s'étonner si après cela les Gots avoient pour luy un respect tout extraordinaire jusqu'à prendre toutes ses paroles pour autant de lois inviolables; s'estant persuadez qu'il ne pouvoit rien dire, ni rien faire, qui ne fust bon en soy mesme, et utile aux autres.²¹

[He greatly enlarged the religion of his country, and introduced a way of living gentler and less barbaric. He made himself known by exposing himself to a multitude of dangers, for the conversion of its peoples. More than this, he invented writing for them, in characters that may be seen today in diverse regions, and translated the Bible into their language so that they might learn it; all except the Books of Kings, for fear that reading of all the wars and battles of which these are full might further incite these peoples to a pursuit of which they were already too ardently inclined. It is not to be wondered at that the Goths held him in extraordinary esteem, to the point of taking all his sayings for so many inviolable laws; being persuaded that he could do or say nothing that was not good in itself and profitable to others.]

¹⁹ Ibid. ²⁰ Ibid. ²¹ Ibid., p. 605.

Ulfilas has done all that a Christian missionary or an Enlightened law-giver should do, in coupling the conversion of his people with their civilisation. At the same time, he has incurred the risk run by all lawgivers among the heathen: that of being taken for a prophet (which no Christian should be), whose words are themselves of divine power. The *philosophe* Anquetil-Duperron considered how the legislator might be tempted to enthusiasm and charlatanry;²² Tillemont the Jansenist sees the danger that the good man may suppose his goodness to be his own and not God's. The Stoic emperors, Trajan and the Antonines, had damned themselves, Tillemont held, by the pride they took in their own virtue; the same pride had tempted the Christian Ulfilas into diminishing the divinity of Christ.

Un merite si eclatant, et cette veneration extreme qu'on avoit pour luy, estoient de grandes tentations, et il falloit une humilité tres profonde pour soutenir un eleve-ment si extraordinaire. Mais si l'erreur est d'ordinaire la punition de l'orgueil, il est aisé de juger que l'esprit d'Ulphilas s'estoit élevé par la vanité avant que de tomber par l'heresie . . . il y a des personnes dans l'Eglise qui paroissent faire de grandes choses et inimitables au commun des hommes, que Dieu rejette cependant comme des hommes tout charnels, parceque le principe de leurs actions n'est pas la grace du Saint Esprit, mais un grand desir de l'estime et de la gloire des hommes; que leur courage n'est point la force de la charité, mais la dureté de l'orgueil.²³

[A reputation so outstanding, and the extreme veneration in which he was held, were the greatest of temptations, and the most profound humility was needed to endure such an extraordinary elevation. But if error is usually the punishment of pride, it is easy to suppose that the mind of Ulfilas was inflated by vanity before falling through heresy . . . there are those in the Church who seem to achieve things too great to be imitated by ordinary men, but whom God rejects as merely fleshly men, since the force driving their actions is not the grace of the Holy Spirit, but a great desire for praise and glory among men, and their courage is not the effect of charity but of pride and hardness of heart.]

Tillemont does not tell us how Ulfilas came to be an Arian – he was probably brought up as one from infancy – but insists that the pride that blinds us to the grace behind our virtue is closely allied with the refusal to see Christ as fully divine and the source of all grace. It is the Arianism, not the barbarism, of the Goths that gives their conquests in the west its meaning in sacred history, and Valens, himself Arian, is almost complicit in this. If he perishes by fire in the rout of Adrianople, it is his just punishment for leading so many to the flames of hell which are the penalty of heresy. Since Tillemont's histories do not go beyond the early sixth century, we have not his narrative of the recovery of the west for Catholic

²² BSE, p. 35. ²³ *Mémoires*, vi, p. 605.

orthodoxy, though no doubt Clovis and the kingdom of the Franks would have been principal actors in it. But Theodosius and the return of the east to orthodoxy are a separate and nearly a secondary theme, and here Tillemont's narrative, though not the value judgements attending it, is not very different from Gibbon's, although the latter relegates barbaric Arianism to the status of an appendix. In both, however, the rapid decline of Arianism in its eastern strongholds remains difficult to explain (though Tillemont is less concerned to explain than to celebrate it). Gibbon tells the tale in his own setting.

(III)

Theodosius in this narrative imposes a predominantly western Trinitarianism on a hitherto 'Arian' – i.e. multiconfessional – east where emperors have given preference to non-Nicene theologies, and does so with remarkable speed and success. Gibbon draws our attention to vigorous upholders of Nicene orthodoxy in the west – Jerome, Martin of Tours, Ambrose of Milan, and occasionally the young Augustine – and in the east, with the Cappadocians Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus.²⁴ But Cappadocia is a distant province, and the great cities, Constantinople and Antioch if not Alexandria, are in the hands of Arian bishops enjoying considerable popular support. Theodosius has to proceed by replacing these and substituting men of his own choosing, asserting his imperial authority and employing shows of force.

Gibbon's narrative, therefore, is one of orthodoxy and intolerance; terms inseparable if not interchangeable (the heretics are generally as intolerant as the orthodox). The *Decline and Fall* has already become an enquiry into the appearance of both intolerance and toleration as new historical phenomena, as polytheism gives way to monotheism and poetic mythology to philosophy's engagement with that which it cannot explain; and the deeply felt Enlightened belief that one opinion should not persecute another has become a programme for reducing communion with Christ as one's saviour to a debate between opinions as to his capacity to be such. Theodosius's proclamation of a Trinitarian orthodoxy is therefore a proclamation of intolerance and persecution; those who do not accept the imperial creed are called impious madmen, forbidden to use churches or to assemble outside them, and threatened with such civil penalties as the emperor shall from time to time inflict. The moment of orthodoxy is the birth of a persecuting society.

²⁴ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 29. Gregory of Nyssa is not mentioned.

The writings of the Arians, if they had been permitted to exist, would perhaps contain the lamentable story of the persecution which afflicted the church under the reign of the impious Theodosius; and the sufferings of *their* holy confessors might claim the pity of the disinterested reader.²⁵

It is already clear, however, that these are persecutions without martyrs; nobody is offered the opportunity to confess his faith at the price of death. Since Julian's time if no earlier, it has been recognised that the multiplication of martyrs is counter-productive; and persecution has come to mean, more and more, either excommunication by ecclesiastical authority backed by imperial, or the imposition of civil penalties by imperial authority with ecclesiastical support. In Gibbon's own time of course, it was precisely this merger of civil and ecclesiastical penalties and authorities which was at issue under the heading of toleration. So it had been, for the first time, in late antiquity under the reign of Theodosius, with the difference that nobody pleaded the cause or advanced the doctrine of toleration, as unthinkable to heretics as to the orthodox.

The orthodox emperor considered every heretic as a rebel against the supreme powers of heaven and earth; and each of these powers might exercise their peculiar jurisdiction over the soul and body of the guilty.

The anathemas of the church were fortified by a sort of civil excommunication, which separated them [the heretics] from their fellow-citizens by a peculiar brand of infamy ... The sectaries were gradually disqualified for the possession of honourable or lucrative employments and Theodosius was satisfied with his own justice, when he decreed that, as the Eunomians distinguished the nature of the Son from that of the Father, they should be incapable of making their wills, or of receiving any advantage from testamentary donations.²⁶

It is the sort of jest Julian had enjoyed making against the Christians, and declares a similar intention of practising a civil rather than a mortal persecution. Theodosius (or his ministers) hopes to use civil authority as a weapon to enforce orthodoxy, and issues a great number of edicts to that effect. These are directed also against the ordination of heretical clergy, and the right of heretics to assemble even in secret. They reach the point of pronouncing a death sentence against Manichaeans, and even Quartodecimans who celebrate Easter on a day of their own,²⁷ and the office of inquisitors is invented for the first time.

Yet we are assured that the execution of his penal edicts was seldom enforced; and that the pious emperor appeared less desirous to punish than to reclaim or terrify his refractory subjects.²⁸

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 32–3. Gibbon's emphasis. ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37. ²⁷ *Ibid.* ²⁸ pp. 37–8.

Gibbon is aware that the innumerable edicts of the Codex Theodosianus were issued at a distance from the scene of their enforcement, and are not always to be taken at face value. The central issue in a great many cases is the possession of churches and the exclusion by locally dominant factions of their theological opponents. Constantinople itself has been Arian since the days of Eusebius of Nicomedia forty years before, and the numerous sects into which the anti-Nicene persuasion has become divided are free from persecution; only the Nicene orthodox are denied public or private worship. At the death of Valens, however, the latter organise themselves, and become a congregation without a bishop, to lead which they invite the Cappadocian Gregory of Nazianzus. With him there returns to Gibbon's narrative the 'sentimental' history so far found only with Julian the Apostate;²⁹ Gregory has left many letters and orations, and a verse autobiography, with the result that we know his inner life and self-image as we know Julian's. Gibbon goes so far as to compare his complaints against the ingratitude of his spiritual brother Basil with Helena's reproach of Hermia in Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. The language of the heart, he says, is always the same.³⁰ Gregory will dominate Gibbon's narrative for several pages, as a vividly self-aware personality and as a confused and unhappy actor in the triumph of orthodoxy.

The unconsecrated house where he preaches to a Nicene conventicle – it is a temptation to use this term – is assailed by hooligan mobs of monks and women³¹ issuing from Hagia Sophia, until Theodosius, returning as if in triumph from the Gothic campaign, summons Damophilus, the Arian bishop, and gives him the choice between Nicene subscription and instant deprivation. Damophilus chooses exile, though it is remarked by Tillemont that his congregation continued for some time to meet outside the walls of the city;³² an indication that what was at stake was the imperial authority to impose doctrine rather than the determination to root out heresy. Gregory is installed as bishop, observing miserably that a military guard is needed to escort him to Hagia Sophia through crowds of furious Arians lining the rooftops. Nevertheless, Gibbon is somewhat perplexed by the rapid submission and disappearance of the diversity of anti-Nicene convictions which have kept the empire ecclesiastically divided for so long. A special commission and a military force are established to clear the churches; but

this ecclesiastical revolution was conducted with so much discretion and vigour, that the religion of the emperor was established, without tumult or bloodshed, in

²⁹ Above, pp. 56–57. ³⁰ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 29, n. 29. ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

³² Tillemont, *Empereurs*, v, p. 91: 'dans les fobourgs de Constantinople'.

all the provinces of the East. . . . [T]here is reason to imagine that the violence of zeal and revenge was in some measure eluded by the want of resistance; and that, in their adversity, the Arians displayed much less firmness than had been exerted by the orthodox party under the reigns of Constantius and Valens.³³

It is hard to read this passage without feeling that Gibbon lacks both information and explanation regarding the disappearance of Arianism from an east where it had been so deeply rooted in Hellenistic culture. About the barbarous Arians of the west he has in this chapter nothing to say. The issue of the Trinity reappears, however, with the summoning of the Council of Constantinople, over which Gregory of Nazianzus finds himself presiding. It is necessary to condemn the followers of Macedonius, who cannot accept the full divinity of the Holy Ghost. They accuse Gregory of worshipping three Gods, and Gibbon comes close to concurring, in a footnote which runs: 'Gregory himself was almost a Tritheist, and his monarchy of heaven resembles a well-regulated aristocracy.'³⁴ He is looking back here to chapter 21, where he had insisted that the human intellect, faced with the mystery of incarnation, found it hard not to revolve between a series of unsatisfactory positions, of which tritheism was one.³⁵ Jean Le Clerc, with Tillemont the authors of the lives of Gregory that Gibbon chose to follow,³⁶ had himself been accused of Sabellianism,³⁷ but Gibbon might have cited his observation that the Trinity exercises a monarchy which is not that of a single person, but of a trinity in unity, and the will exercised is that of three persons exercised in perfect unity. But Le Clerc's French makes Gregory assert that the unity of three wills is the product of *consentement* between the persons, and this may have moved Gibbon to describe them as an aristocracy; whereas Le Clerc would have it the product of an identity of *volontés* hard to separate from an identity of persons.³⁸ Gibbon once described this problem as 'the deepest and darkest corner of the whole theological abyss',³⁹ but he has not quite avoided peering into it. If he does not explore Trinitarian theology, it is because the Constantinopolitan formula did not disintegrate like Nicene into heresies whose conflicts became those of empire; and he has even less to say of Gregory's theology than had Le Clerc.

The 'sentimental' history of Gregory of Nazianzen dominates this part of chapter 27. The bishops attending the Council of Constantinople are an unedifying crew, and Gibbon makes much of the circumstance that their historian – the nearest we have to a Sarpi of the fourth century – is no

³³ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 32. ³⁴ p. 33 and n. 41. ³⁵ Above, pp. 90–92.

³⁶ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 29, n. 27. ³⁷ *RFT*, pp. 115–16.

³⁸ *BUH*, XVIII, pp. 93–4, 103–5. ³⁹ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 783, n. 59.

heretic or sceptic, but the orthodox and saintly Gregory himself.⁴⁰ He is less interested in their theological deliberations than in the factious intrigues of which Gregory became the target and which reached the point where he was driven to offer his resignation, which the emperor promptly accepted. Nectarius, chosen to succeed him, was an elderly senator who had to be baptised before he was consecrated bishop.⁴¹ It was obviously a political appointment designed to reduce tensions, and even Tillemont is moved to remark that Nectarius ‘avoit beaucoup de bonnes qualitez pour un particulier, et peu pour un Evesque’.⁴² Gregory returns to Cappadocia and ends his days in devotional and autobiographical writings. Gibbon bestows on him the Enlightened epitaph:

The title of Saint has been added to his name; but the tenderness of his heart, and the elegance of his genius reflect a more pleasing lustre on the memory of Gregory Nazianzen.⁴³

Politeness and sentiment outrank holiness; this is Enlightenment.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, II, p. 35. It is here that Gibbon's style perhaps most resembles that of the late Hugh Trevor-Roper, who modelled his own upon Gibbon's.

⁴¹ p. 36. ⁴² Tillemont, *Empereurs*, v, p. 93. ⁴³ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 36.

15 Ambrose of Milan: the church and the empire

(I)

It is here that Gibbon presents his account of Theodosius's repressive measures and his doubts as to how far they were put into effect. Chapter 27 is a web it is sometimes hard to unravel. He continues:

The theory of persecution was established by Theodosius, whose justice and piety have been applauded by the saints; but the practice of it, in the fullest extent, was reserved for his rival and colleague Maximus, the first among the Christian princes who shed the blood of his Christian subjects on account of their religious opinions.¹

The last word should as ever be noted. The victims of execution are not the proponents of a significant heresy concerning the Son or the Spirit, but the followers of Priscillian, a charismatic preacher in Spain who preaches abstinence from sex and animal products and wanders (though himself a bishop) at the head of a sect of devotees, of whom several are women.² The usual rumours and slanders arise, and the execution of the Priscillianists is in part a misdirected police action. However, they also profess Manichaean and Gnostic beliefs, which brings them under Theodosius's edict threatening such heresies with the death penalty. Gibbon does not make this point, noting instead that a controversy broke out over the justice and regularity of their sentencing, in which he is pleased to notice that both Martin of Tours and Ambrose of Milan – who now begins to play a major part in his narrative –

on this occasion asserted the cause of toleration . . . The bishops of Tours and Milan pronounced, without hesitation, the eternal damnation of heretics; but they were surprised and shocked by the bloody image of their temporal death, and the honest feelings of nature resisted the artificial prejudices of theology.

This is the language of Enlightenment, but it is also the language of law.

¹ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 38. ² pp. 38–9.

The humanity of Ambrose and Martin was confirmed by the scandalous irregularity of the proceedings against Priscillian and his adherents. The civil and ecclesiastical ministers had transgressed the limits of their respective provinces. The secular judge had presumed to receive an appeal, and to pronounce a definitive sentence, in a matter of faith and episcopal jurisdiction. The bishops had disgraced themselves by exercising the functions of accusers in a criminal prosecution. . . . Since the death of Priscillian, the rude attempts of persecution have been refined and methodised in the holy office, which assigns their distinct parts to the ecclesiastical and secular powers. The devoted victim is regularly delivered by the priest to the magistrate, and by the magistrate to the executioner; and the inexorable sentence of the church, which declares the spiritual guilt of the offender, is expressed in the mild language of pity and intercession.³

The Inquisition is never long in appearing in debate over the practice of persecution, or in the language of those who believe that faith leads inexorably to intolerance; but Gibbon is making a further point. Since the rise of a clergy led to the erection of spiritual authority and the move from ancient into modern history, and since emperors have been led to regard that authority as bound up with their own, the boundaries between the two have been indistinct; and persecution, in a Christian unlike a pagan world the infliction of a penalty by one authority for an offence defined by the other, is a consequence of their interlocking presence. The career of Ambrose, who now becomes a dominant figure in Gibbon's account of the reign of Theodosius, carries the history of church and state a step beyond any point yet reached.

Gibbon relates that career through Ambrose's translation from governor to archbishop, his role as spiritual adviser to Gratian, and his part in arranging the settlement of a tripartite empire after the invasion of Maximus. He now finds himself a figure close to the household of Valentinian II, an emperor still immature and largely governed by his mother Justina, one of a series of women exercising informal power (though she bears the title *Augusta*) who will appear in coming chapters of the *Decline and Fall*. She is an Arian (it scarcely matters of what kind) and though she plays no direct part in ecclesiastical politics, she requests the reservation of one of the churches of Milan for Arian worship by herself and apparently her son the emperor. These churches are all consecrated and under the guardianship of the emperor, but while Maximus and of course Theodosius are confirmed Nicenes, Justina's conduct calls her son's convictions into doubt. Gibbon says she 'was persuaded that a Roman emperor might claim, in his own dominions, the public exercise of his religion',⁴ but as an Englishman he should have known better; and

³ pp. 39–40. ⁴ p. 41.

even had Justina requested a private church for her own Arian use, the examples of Henrietta Maria and Catherine of Braganza should have been in his mind and possibly were. In neither the fourth nor the eighteenth century had toleration reached the point of rendering the sovereign's 'public exercise of his religion' a private matter.

[T]he conduct of Ambrose was governed by very different principles. The palaces of the earth might indeed belong to Caesar, but the churches were the houses of God; and, within the limits of his diocese –

Ambrose is no pope –

he himself, as the lawful successor of the apostles, was the only minister of God.⁵

He refuses to yield up any church, and when summoned to appear before the imperial council declares himself ready to die a martyr; and he supports this moral blackmail by appearing at the head of a crowd of orthodox worshippers ready to witness his martyrdom but large and defiant enough to threaten the security of the court. Justina seems to give way, but prepares the principal basilica for Arian worship. Popular violence is resumed, and Ambrose is

solicited to restore peace to his country, by a timely compliance with the will of his sovereign. The reply of Ambrose was couched in the most humble and respectful terms, which might, however, be interpreted as a serious declaration of civil war.⁶

He is ready for martyrdom, but cannot guarantee his flock's submission. When Justina sends a force of Arian Goths to occupy the basilica, they are outfaced by Ambrose and represented as theological innocents by Gibbon, and the court is forced to give way.

The mother of Valentinian could never forgive the triumph of Ambrose: and the royal youth uttered a passionate exclamation, that his own servants were ready to betray him into the hands of an insolent priest.⁷

Would any reader of Gibbon – would Gibbon himself – fail to hear echoed the voice of Henry II complaining against the 'turbulent priest' Thomas Becket? The resources of the court are not exhausted, and 'an edict of toleration' declares the empire ready to protect all who wish to 'profess the faith of Rimini', which had left the world surprised to find itself Arian thirty years before.⁸ Valentinian and his mother appear to have stepped over the brink, and one wonders what Theodosius might have done had civil war developed. Once again, however, Ambrose outfoxes his emperor. He barricades himself in the cathedral – Gibbon has a footnote

⁵ *Ibid.* ⁶ p. 43. ⁷ *Ibid.* ⁸ p. 44; above, p. 118.

comparing him with the Cardinal de Retz in the wars of the Fronde⁹ – and there discovers the bones of two martyrs in the pagan persecutions, who become the patron saints of Catholic Milan.¹⁰

This is a crucial moment in Gibbon's history, since in the next chapter he will present the veneration, which he calls the worship, of martyrs and their physical remains as a major transformation of Christian religion. More immediately, it is a principal weapon in the church's pursuit of two goals: freedom from imperial authority and intolerance towards the unorthodox; and this profound ambiguity in the character of freedom will remain a constant in western history. More immediately still, the declaration in favour of Rimini has brought the central third of empire – or at least its ruling family – to the brink of announcing itself Arian, whatever that may now mean; and one asks what its orthodox colleagues to west and east might have done by way of response. Instead of joining in a Trinitarian crusade, however, Maximus changes the historic scene by attempting the takeover of Valentinian's dominions, and Theodosius responds by taking the latter under his protection.

The central regime rapidly collapses before a formidable army of Gauls and Germans, built up by Valentinian I and now commanded by Maximus. There ensues, however, a conscious parallel with the campaign of Constantius against Magnentius nearly forty years before, and the former's victory at Mursa;¹¹ that is to say, an eastern army of horse-archers, Huns, Alani and even Goths, is victorious under Theodosius's command over 'the steady valour of the Gauls and Germans', a victory not this time of mailed cataphracts but of 'the rapid motions of a Tartar war'.¹² Maximus – a figure far from the Napoleonic superman depicted in Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill* – is captured and executed, while Justina and her son, at the head of a naval expeditionary force, effect an entry into Rome itself, where Theodosius joins them in a triumph more his than theirs. So ends – without a word from Gibbon – the last flicker of imperial Arianism.

(II)

Ancient historians, and their early modern followers, commonly wrote their histories as sequences of reigns, leaving it to the moment of an emperor's or king's death to give a balanced account of his good and bad characteristics. Tillemont's *Histoire des Empereurs* is an example of this practice. It had always been a problem that other narratives intruded

⁹ p. 43, n. 64. ¹⁰ pp. 44–5. ¹¹ Above, pp. 55–56. ¹² p. 49.

themselves and could not be dealt with under this heading; and the growth of ecclesiastical, legal and philosophical histories complicated the task of composition. David Hume, considered a pioneer of 'philosophical' history, commonly related the events of each king's reign from chronicle sources, leaving it to the end of the reign to set forth the legal and cultural developments that had occurred during it, in not always easy combination with an account of each king's character.¹³ Gibbon is making use of regnal history, though not in the formalised pattern still employed by Tillemont, and the fact that Theodosius's reign is the last of its kind gives his personality a special prominence; but the *Decline and Fall* is not an *histoire des empereurs*, and the themes emerging from erudition, religion and philosophy must be combined with the history of reigns and rulership. In chapter 27 he chooses the peak moment, not the end of the reign, for an account of Theodosius's good and bad qualities, and uses it to introduce two dramatic events whose roles in the history of *Decline and Fall* – assuming that to be Gibbon's central and governing narrative – are not identical.

The moment is that at which the emperor, having disposed of Maximus, stations himself at Milan and makes a triumphal entry into Rome, displaying himself as the effective ruler of a united empire whose transalpine and Italo-Illyrian segments he has nominally transferred to the young Valentinian II and his mother (who does not live long). Gibbon proceeds to a diptych of opposed qualities – a likeable personality and a capacity for direct action, opposed by a tendency to laziness and a proneness to fits of anger; we may recall Valentinian I – and insists that Theodosius was aware of his faults and tried to control them.

But the painful virtue which claims the merit of victory is exposed to the danger of defeat; and the reign of a wise and merciful prince was polluted by an act of cruelty which would stain the annals of Nero or Domitian. Within the space of three years the inconsistent historian of Theodosius –

is it not Theodosius's inconsistency which a consistent historian narrates?

must relate the generous pardon of the citizens of Antioch, and the inhuman massacre of the people of Thessalonica.¹⁴

Both are cities of the eastern empire, not of the western with whose history Gibbon is chiefly concerned; and the crisis at Antioch actually precedes the overthrow of Maximus which it is made to follow. In opposing a 'generous pardon' to an 'inhuman massacre', Gibbon is writing

¹³ See particularly the medieval chapters of Hume's *History of England*.

¹⁴ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 52.

moral history of the classic kind, and comes no nearer to the Decline and Fall than the reminder that even the best of emperors were despots exposed to the temptation of uncontrolled power.¹⁵ Theodosius has by this time acquired an evil counsellor – Rufinus, prefect of the east, whom Gibbon suggests may be responsible for the massacre at Thessalonica¹⁶ – and this episode precipitates a crisis in the relations between church and empire, central to the ‘modern’ history that replaces ‘ancient’ as ecclesiastics acquire authority. What happens at Antioch, however, is simply an exemplary instance of the history of clemency. The citizens carry their love of disrespectful behaviour – from which Julian had suffered so much – a great way too far. Outraged by the heavy taxes required for the forthcoming western war, they rush into the streets cheering (so it is reported) for Maximus, and finding the bishop when they demonstrate before his residence not at home, go so far as to overthrow the statues of the emperor and his heirs, smashing them up with every mark of infamy. This is not a serious rebellion, but so grave an insult to the emperor’s *maiestas* cannot be neglected; and the rumour spreads that Theodosius intends to exile or execute the city magistrates and deprive Antioch of its metropolitan status, subjecting it to the jurisdiction of a neighbouring small town. This of course is the penalty Julian had threatened to inflict on Antioch following the affair of the *Misopogon*,¹⁷ though nobody seems to point this out; and once again Libanius, Julian’s ‘sophist of Antioch’, depicts the city’s guilt, fear and remorse in eloquent addresses to Theodosius in distant Constantinople.

Here it is informative to compare Gibbon’s account of the episode with the much fuller one (which he certainly knew) given by Tillemont, and to observe that the latter’s pious orthodoxy (in Gibbon’s eyes bigotry) enabled him to give a far more detailed (whether or not a more convincing) account of the affair, in which ecclesiastics and considerations of faith play a larger part. As well as the orations of the pagan Libanius, there are the sermons of the Christian saint John Chrysostom, resident in the city, which present the fears of the Antiochenes turning to remorse and Christian reform. Possibly this is why Gibbon remarks in a footnote: ‘I do not pretend to *much* personal acquaintance with Chrysostom; but Tillemont ... had read him with curiosity and diligence.’¹⁸ The latter transforms the story from one of imperial clemency to one of massive spiritual action. The mountains around Antioch were heavily populated by ‘monks and hermits’ who, in Gibbon’s language, ‘descended in

¹⁵ Cf. Womersley, 1994, I, p. 103.

¹⁶ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 99; *Mémoires*, VIII, p. 210. ¹⁷ Above, p. 200.

¹⁸ Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 55–6, n. 90. Gibbon’s emphasis.

swarms' on the city, where the imperial magistrates 'listened with reverence to [their] pressing solicitations'.¹⁹ We have not heard from Gibbon on this subject for some time, but in a subsequent chapter he will give a uniformly hostile account of monasticism in general, and later in chapter 27 will describe how the affair of Thessalonica ended in Theodosius's submission to ecclesiastical though not monastic authority. It is therefore striking to compare his treatment of the role of monks in the crisis at Antioch with Tillemont's account of how 'les saints solitaires' intervened on the same occasion, when

leur charité leur fit quitter les tentes, les cavernes et les autres retraites où ils se tenoient cachez depuis tant d'années; et sans que personne les en pressast, ils accoururent de tous costez dans la ville et y parurent comme des Anges descendus du ciel. Leur seule vue consolait le peuple dans son affliction, en luy inspirant le mepris de toutes les choses de la terre, et de la vie mesme.²⁰

[their charity made them leave the tents, caves and other places where they had kept themselves hidden for so many years; and without anyone's leadership, they flocked into the city on all sides and appeared there like angels descended from heaven. The mere sight of them comforted the people in their affliction, filling them with contempt for all earthly things, even for life itself.]

Not, one would have said, a common emotion in the streets of Antioch. The solitaries invade the tribunals, offering themselves as martyrs in the place of the accused, and declaring that God will judge princes as he will other men; and one of them confronts the imperial commissioners, ordering them in Syriac to dismount.

D'abord ils se mirent en colere de voir un petit vieillard couvert de méchans haillons, leur parler avec cette autorité. Mais quand on leur dit qui c'estoit ils descendirent de cheval, et se jetterent à ses genoux pour luy demand en pardon.²¹

[At first they were moved to anger by the sight of a little old man covered in dirty rags, speaking to them with such authority. But when they were informed who he was, they descended from their horses and threw themselves at his knees to beg his pardon.]

Only a determination – for what reason? – to present the affair of Antioch as a display of imperial clemency as part of a character study can account for Gibbon's neglect of the opportunity to set this humiliation of civil authority at eastern and monastic hands alongside the western and episcopal humiliation he will show Theodosius suffering from Ambrose in the affair of Thessalonica. There is an interesting sequel in Tillemont's *Histoire des Empereurs*. It is directly after an announcement that he will not

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, and n. 89. ²⁰ Tillemont, *Empereurs*, v, pp. 119–20. ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

in this work deal with Thessalonica at all that Tillemont relates a law enacted by Theodosius in 390

Par laquelle il ordonne que tous ceux qui faisoient profession de la vie monastique, seroient obligez de se retirer dans les deserts et les solitudes, sans qu'il leur fust permis d'entrer dans les villes. Il ne faisoit que suivre en cela l'esprit de l'Eglise et les Saints, qui n'ont jamais aimé de voir dans les villes ceux qui font profession d'une vie toute de retraite et de silence.

Mais il reconnoist luy mesme que cette loy alloit trop loin, et qu'il avoit esté porté à la faire par les plaintes injustes des juges . . . Aussi il cassa absolument cette loy par celle qu'il publia le 17 avril 392, où il rendit aux moines la liberté d'entrer dans les villes lorsque la nécessité ou la charité les y appelloit.²²

[in which he ordained that all persons professing the monastic life should remain in deserts and solitary dwellings, unless permitted to enter the cities. He was doing no more than following the intentions of the church and the saints, who have never liked seeing in the cities those who have vowed to profess a life of withdrawal and silence.

But he came to recognise that this law went too far, and that he had been led to enact it by the unjust complaints of the judges . . . He therefore annulled it altogether by a further law published on 17 April 392, in which he restored to monks the freedom to enter the cities whenever called to do so by necessity or charity]

an open invitation to act as they chose. Tillemont seems to have reservations; in his life of Athanasius he had made known his preference for monks who lived under the sober discipline of a common rule.²³ Gibbon, who has much to say in this and other chapters about gangs of monks invading cities with fanatical intentions, makes no mention of this matter, but defers all he has to say about monasticism to chapter 37, which appears after the end of empire in the west has been recounted.²⁴ He continues to separate the thematic from the narrative, especially where ecclesiastical history is concerned. Tillemont for his part performs a more startling act of relegation, announcing that his account of Theodosius's reign in the *Histoire des Empereurs* will not relate the massacre at Thessalonica or the emperor's repentance and penance because that has been dealt with in the life of St Ambrose which forms part of the *Mémoires*.²⁵ In the latter work history is at the service of hagiography and it is Ambrose's saintly actions that are to be recorded. Gibbon is concerned with their impact upon civil history; is Tillemont avoiding it?

²² *Ibid.*, p. 146. ²³ Above, p. 138. ²⁴ Below, pp. 439–46.

²⁵ Tillemont, *Empereurs*, v, p. 146.

The affair of Antioch precedes the overthrow of Maximus and the reinstallation of Valentinian II as the closely supervised emperor of an undivided west. Theodosius removes his capital and court from Constantinople to Milan, and it is during the years he spends there that he encounters the formidable tactician Ambrose, with his genius for threatening his own martyrdom as an instrument for securing policies which are not those of religious pluralism. In two episodes, those of Callinicum and Thessalonica, he employs not only the threat of martyrdom, but that of withholding the eucharist itself; and it is important to compare the accounts of both given by Gibbon and by Tillemont. The former is obliged by the pressures of composition to give accounts more cursory than those the latter has space for; but Tillemont deals with Ambrose's values, as well as his tactics, at a length perhaps greater than the unsympathetic Gibbon wishes to set forth. In Tillemont, therefore, we find what Gibbon chose not to say; though this is not to imply that he should have chosen otherwise.

Both historians – and indeed their recent successors – are obliged to rely for their narratives on fourth- and fifth-century ecclesiastical historians. In the affair of Antioch Gibbon (and Tillemont) are able to balance, as Gibbon at least is always anxious to do, the non-Christian Libanius against the Christian Chrysostom; but those of Callinicum and Thessalonica are related only by the ecclesiastics, including rather crucially Ambrose himself and his biographer or hagiographer Paulinus. Gibbon furthermore includes the story of Callinicum within that of Thessalonica as prelude to Ambrose's conduct in the latter; whereas Tillemont, though he treats the one as prelude to the other, narrates them, as they certainly occurred, separately. In 388 it becomes known to Theodosius's council at Milan that the bishop of Callinicum, a small city on the distant Euphrates, has incited his congregation to destroy a synagogue. Theodosius ordains that the bishop is to rebuild it at his own expense, meaning probably that of the local church which Constantine has long ago exempted from curial obligations. Ambrose – close enough to the emperor to know what is going on in his council – swings into action, not defending the bishop's conduct but declaring that to oblige him to rebuild the synagogue is to command him to act against the duties imposed by his Christian faith. Martyrdom would be preferable to obedience, and Ambrose offers to share this penalty himself. Here it is worth comparing the language used by our two historians. Gibbon's Ambrose

considers the toleration of the Jewish as the persecution of the Christian religion; boldly declares that he himself and every true believer would eagerly dispute with the bishop of Callinicum the merit of the deed and the crown of martyrdom; and

laments, in the most pathetic terms, that the execution of the sentence would be fatal to the fame and salvation of Theodosius.²⁶

Whereas in Tillemont – we must remember that he is able to deal with the matter at greater length – Ambrose

se croyoit responsable aux autres Evesques de tout ce que Theodose pourroit faire estant à Milan. L'amour mesme qu'il portoit à ce prince, dont il estimoit beaucoup la pieté, luy donna du courage en cette rencontre; et la reconnaissance des graces qu'il en avoit receües, le fit resoudre mesme à l'offenser, si cela estoit necessaire, plutost que de luy cacher la verité en une rencontre où il y alloit de son salut.²⁷

[thought himself answerable to the other bishops for all that Theodosius might do while resident at Milan. The very love he felt for his prince, whose piety he held in high esteem, gave him courage to face this encounter; and his recognition of all the favours he had received from him made him resolve even to offend him at need, rather than conceal the truth from him in a matter affecting his salvation.]

There is more at stake than his regard for Theodosius as a man, an emperor, or even a believer. He is beginning to present the emperor to himself as the bearer of a holy office, a divine kingship which carries with it the duty of respecting the independent and in some ways superior authority of the church of which he is both governor and member.

Il luy demande que s'il ne se contente pas de ce qu'il luy écrit, il fasse assembler des Evesques, et qu'il prenne leur avis sur une affaire toute de religion, puisque dans celles où il ne s'agissoit que d'argent, il prenoit la peine de consulter ses officers.²⁸

[He asks that if the emperor is not satisfied by what he has written him, he should call a council of bishops and seek their advice on what is strictly a matter of religion, since in cases where no more was at stake than money, he would take the trouble of consulting his civil officers.]

The penalisation of the bishop of Callinicum might easily have been negotiated – there is modern evidence that Theodosius was displeased that it had not been dealt with locally – but Ambrose is loading the matter with issues on which there can be no compromise. The sacred mission of the church is being made not only exempt from civil jurisdiction, but itself a source of jurisdiction in which the emperor is being invited to play a part exalted but not yet defined, and the authority to bring salvation to the soul is becoming an authority exercised in civil society and government. An eighteenth-century English reader of the *Decline and Fall* might well recall – though Gibbon does not mention – the history of Henry II,

²⁶ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 58. ²⁷ *Mémoires*, x, p. 202. ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

Thomas Becket, and the question of criminous clerks;²⁹ and the disputants of the fourth century as well as the twelfth find themselves invoking not merely martyrdom, but the presence of Christ in the sacraments. It is at this point, according to the historians, that Ambrose finds himself unwilling to consecrate the elements in the presence of an emperor who has not conceded that the spiritual functions even of the bishop of Callinicum are immune from earthly judgement.

It is unsurprising that the historians tell the story of what now happened differently. What Gibbon thought about the service of holy communion he does not tell us though we may suspect; he merely remarks in a footnote at this point that 'Bayle and Barbeyrac have justly condemned the archbishop'. The text reads:

As [his] private admonition did not produce an immediate effect, the archbishop from his pulpit publicly addressed the emperor on his throne; nor would he consent to offer the oblation of the altar –

language it is hard to render specific –

until he had obtained from Theodosius a solemn and positive declaration which secured the impunity of the bishop and monks of Callinicum.³⁰

Tillemont's language is more dramatic and tells us more about the issues Ambrose saw fit to mobilise. He depicts him as *debout* in his *chaire* – pulpit? *cathedra*? – before an emperor seated (enthroned?) in the principal church of Milan.

Enfin il obtint de l'Empereur la promesse qu'il souhaitoit, et il luy dit qu'il alloit donc offrir le sacrifice sur sa parole. Il le repeta par deux fois; et l'Empereur luy répondit à la seconde, Oui, offrez sur ma parole. Comme il descendoit de la chaire, l'Empereur luy dit qu'il avoit presché contre luy, laquelle le Saint répondit qu'il n'avoit point presché contre luy, mais pour luy, et l'Empereur reconnut qu'en effect il avoit donné des ordres bien rudes contre l'Evesque de Callinique. Il alla ensuite à l'autel, et y offrit les divins mysteres avec une consolation si particuliere, qu'il la prit pour une marque que Dieu avoit approuvé son action, et l'y avoit assisté de son secours.³¹

[Finally he obtained from the emperor the promise he desired, and told him he was about to offer the sacrifice on his assurance. He repeated this twice, and the second time the emperor replied 'yes, offer it upon my word'. As he was coming down from the pulpit,³² the emperor said that he had preached against him; to which the saint replied that he had by no means preached against him but for him, and the emperor acknowledged that he had issued ordinances too severe against

²⁹ Gibbon will have known Hume's long account of the controversy in vol. I, ch. 8, of the *History of England*.

³⁰ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 58 and n. 92. ³¹ *Mémoires*, x, p. 205. ³² *chaire*.

the bishop of Callinicum. He then turned to the altar, and there made offering of the divine mysteries with a sense of assurance so vivid that he took it as a sign that God had approved and supported his action.]

Gibbon remarks in another footnote that some years later, in Ambrose's absence, Theodosius 'tolerated the Jews and condemned the destruction of their synagogues'.³³ Tillemont says that Ambrose had never called for a general destruction and will have approved of this decree.³⁴ The issue of toleration is always central to Gibbon's mind; but the vast historical significance of the affair of Callinicum is of course Ambrose's invocation of the highest mystery of the Christian faith to support the independence of spiritual action from civil jurisdiction. In making the emperor both the guardian and the minister of this independence, he claims to be exalting the imperial office, not diminishing it. No lay historian tells us what were the feelings of Theodosius.

The massacre at Thessalonica and its aftermath have become a cardinal event in the historiography of church and empire, but it is a problem for both Gibbon and Tillemont, indeed for their successors to this day, that the narrative depends on the ecclesiastical historians of the next century, who in their turn depend on the letters of Ambrose himself, probably edited for posterity, and on his biographer Paulinus, who was probably the editor of the letters. Gibbon in a footnote comments on the very curious circumstance that the pagan historian Zosimus, who lost no opportunity to denigrate Theodosius, makes no mention of the episode at all,³⁵ from which it has been inferred that his principal source, the pagan Eunapius, historian of Julian and the philosophers, did not recount it either. However this may be, it appears that a riot of sports fans at Thessalonica resulted in the murder of the city governor and his staff, that Theodosius ordered reprisals against the city, and that soldiers carried out a selective massacre lasting several hours and resulting in deaths perhaps reaching four figures. It was an appalling miscarriage, and when news of it reached the court and council at Milan it was rightly treated as a major failure of government; we must be careful, however, before ascribing even early modern notions of public opinion to the late Roman empire. Ambrose as bishop of Milan, not a member of the emperor's council but close to the emperor himself, nevertheless takes the step of declaring Theodosius the bearer of a blood guilt from which only repentance and absolution can cleanse him, and of denying him communion until penance has been performed. To understand how Gibbon, Tillemont and historians in our own time have arrived at divergent judgements of this action, it is

³³ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 58, n. 95. ³⁴ *Mémoires*, x, p. 206.

³⁵ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 57, n. 91.

necessary to understand how it is related in the predominantly Ambrosian narratives available to them.

In the affair of Callinicum, Ambrose had announced his unwillingness 'to offer the oblation of the altar' (Gibbon)³⁶ – that is, to proceed to the consecration of the elements ('offrir le sacrifice'; Tillemont)³⁷ – until assured of amnesty for the bishop and his congregation. He now tells Theodosius, according to the later historians,

qu'il n'a pas la hardiesse d'offrir le sacrifice, s'il pretend y assister, et il luy proteste avec serment que c'est Dieu qui le luy avoit defendu par [une] vision . . . Il le conjure donc d'attendre à offrir le sacrifice du corps de J. C. . . . afinque son hostie puisse estre agreable à Dieu, et de se contenter cependant du sacrifice de la priere, qui estoit un sacrifice d'humilité propre à luy obtenir misericorde; au lieu que l'autre eust esté pour luy une action de mepris qui eust excite l'indignation de Dieu contre luy.³⁸

[that he does not dare to offer the sacrifice if [the emperor] presumes to be present; and he declares under oath that God has forbidden him in a vision to do so . . . He enjoins him to wait before offering the sacrifice of Christ's body . . . until his wafer can be acceptable to God, and to content himself meanwhile with the sacrifice of prayer, which offers a humility sufficient to obtain mercy; since the other course would be in him an action of pride that would arouse God's anger against him.]

Ambrose had needed no divine vision before refusing to offer communion in the affair of Callinicum, but what he claims to be at stake this time is the emperor's own fitness to receive the body of Christ. Gibbon does not much differ:

he contended himself with signifying³⁹ an indirect sort of excommunication, by the assurance that he had been warned in a vision not to offer the oblation in the name or in the presence of Theodosius, and by the advice that he would confine himself to the use of prayer, without presuming to approach the altar of Christ, or to receive the holy eucharist with those hands that were still polluted with the blood of an innocent people.⁴⁰

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 58. ³⁷ *Mémoires*, x, p. 205; 'le sacrifice du corps de J. C.', p. 214.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ To this word Gibbon appends a footnote (p. 59, n. 96) criticising the 'miserable rhapsody' of Ambrose's style, which lacks 'the spirit of Tertullian, the copious elegance of Lactantius, the lively wit of Jerom, or the grave energy of Augustin'. It is perhaps the only occasion when Gibbon praises Fathers for their style; and it is characteristic of his Enlightenment that he sees the moment of sacrament as a moment of literary failure. Cf. p. 40, n. 60, where he expresses his astonishment that miracles of Martin of Tours, containing 'facts adapted to the grossest barbarism, are recounted in a style not unworthy of the Augustan age. So natural is the alliance between good taste and good sense, that I am always astonished by this contrast.'

⁴⁰ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 59.

He does not object, or display unbelief, when recognising that Ambrose is prepared to say that only the presence of Christ in the consecrated elements can absolve Theodosius of this guilt, and that he as bishop has authority to say so. Both historians agree that the excommunication is indirect, since the emperor is being advised in a private letter to absent himself from a consecration that cannot be performed in his presence.

The dramatic climax is reached when Theodosius, supposing himself to have discharged his duty of repentance by prayer, presents himself at Milan's principal church, only to be stopped at the entrance by Ambrose, who imposes a penance of tears and humiliation lasting as long as eight months. This confrontation, famous in history, polemic and art, is roundly denied by recent historians,⁴¹ on the grounds that it is unthinkable that Ambrose should have condemned the emperor to public ignominy for so long a period, and that the episode must be an invention by the bishop's biographer. Tillemont indeed has difficulty in fitting the eight months of penance into the chronology of the period, but in the end concludes that they offer the best means of doing so; of which Gibbon remarks –

The date and circumstances of this law –

an edict imposing a delay between sentence and execution, held to mark the climax of Theodosius's repentance for Thessalonica –

are perplexed with difficulties; but I feel myself inclined to favour the honest efforts of Tillemont⁴²

and another scholar. Gibbon thus accepts the story at its full value; the question is what he makes of it. His words are:

the public penance of the emperor Theodosius has been recorded as one of the most honourable events in the annals of the church⁴³

and these should be weighed. One is tempted to say that no historically literate reader in 1781 could have read them without thinking of the emperor Henry IV in the snow at Canossa, or King Henry II doing penance for the murder of Becket at Canterbury; and indeed there have been recent readings of Ambrose's action headed 'von Mailand nach Canossa'.⁴⁴ But these were moments in the history of the papal church, of which Gibbon has yet to say anything; and Ambrose does not refer his actions as bishop of Milan to the judgement of Rome, which plays no part

⁴¹ McLynn, 1994, pp. 327–8; Cameron, 2011, pp. 80–2.

⁴² Womersley, 1994, II, p. 60, n. 99. ⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ McLynn, 1994, p. 393, *sub* 'Schnieffer, R'.

in the story as Tillemont and Gibbon tell it. We might still be in the era outlined by Mosheim, in which an aristocracy of bishops has not yet become the monarchy of the pope.⁴⁵ Tillemont indeed has Ambrose delaying his action even though ‘les autres Evesques le blasmassent’; he has Theodosius recognising ‘quel est le pouvoir des Evesques et quel est celui des Rois’, and that

ce n'estoit pas cette autorité temporelle qu'il avoit audessus des Evesques mesmes, mais la soumission Chrétienne qu'il leur rendroit, que le feroit arriver à la vie bienheureuse et eternelle. C'est pourquoy on a lieu de croire qu'on trouveroit encore aujourd'hui un Theodose, si Dieu susciteroit quelque Ambroise,⁴⁶

[... though other bishops might blame him ... what is the power of bishops and what that of kings ... it was not the temporal authority he possessed over bishops themselves, but the Christian submission he paid them, which would bring him to eternal and blessed life. It is this that makes it possible to believe that a Theodosius would be found today, if God should raise up another Ambrose,]

a possibility which perhaps only a Jansenist could envisage in Tillemont's day. As theologian and historian, however, he need say no more than that bishops were the heirs of the apostles and could perform the sacrifice that brought absolution from sin. As a Catholic, he need not see Ambrose's exaction of penance as a turning point in the history of Christian authority.

It has of course become a commonplace to see it in those terms. Recent scholarship, however, which seems to reject most of the biographer Paulinus's story of the encounter at the church door and the eight months of public humiliation, has Theodosius and Ambrose performing a carefully choreographed ceremony profitable to both; the emperor is absolved of his guilt and the bishop employs spiritual authority to re-edify civil.⁴⁷ When Theodosius says he has sinned like David, and Ambrose replies that he must do penance like him, the premise is that the emperor plays the role of David – king, sinner, saint, and ancestor of Christ after the flesh – and may gladly accept it at the price of conceding to the bishop the role of Nathan the prophet. There remains of course the question how visible all this was to the citizens of the Roman empire in the year 390.

Tillemont would understand this confrontation of *personae*; did it matter to Gibbon? His judgement on the whole episode runs:

Posterity has applauded the virtuous firmness of the archbishop, and the example of Theodosius may prove the beneficial influence of those principles which could force a monarch, exalted above the apprehension of human punishment, to respect the laws and ministers of an invisible Judge. ‘The prince,’ says

⁴⁵ *RFT*, pp. 169, 190, 210–12. ⁴⁶ *Mémoires*, x, p. 220.

⁴⁷ McLynn, 1994, pp. 323–30; Cameron, 2011, pp. 80–1.

Montesquieu, 'who is actuated by the hopes and fears of religion, may be compared to a lion, docile only to the voice, and tractable to the hand, of his keeper.' The motions of the royal animal will therefore depend on the inclination and interest of the man who has acquired such dangerous authority over him; and the priest who holds in his hand the conscience of a king may inflame or moderate his sanguinary passions. The cause of humanity and that of persecution have been asserted by the same Ambrose with equal energy and with equal success.⁴⁸

It is the argument Gibbon has outlined before.⁴⁹ It is well that there should be an authority outside the prince's control; dangerous that this should be an authority existing outside our social nature, but exercised by human actors behaving within it. Gibbon does not mention that Montesquieu in this passage⁵⁰ is engaged in refuting Bayle's suggestion that atheism may be less dangerous than superstition – an atheist tyrant, he says, would be controlled by nothing at all – nor does Gibbon here enquire how Roman society had got into such a condition that only bishops could check imperial power by public action. The last sentence quoted tells us that it was the history of intolerance that was at the forefront of his mind; the history of empire lay further back.

⁴⁸ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 60. ⁴⁹ Above, pp. 76–78. ⁵⁰ *Esprit des Lois*, book 24, ch. 2.

16 Theodosius narrated and re-narrated: the death and rebirth of polytheism

(I)

We are at a moment of complexity, if not uncertainty, in Gibbon's constructions of chapter 27, volume III, and the entire narrative of *Decline and Fall*. The great encounters between Theodosius and Ambrose mark nearly the last appearance of ecclesiastical history in the volumes of 1781; that is, the tension between imperial and spiritual authority plays no part in the loss of control over the provinces of the west, and there is no sign that Gibbon assigned any causative role to it in these chapters. It reappears only when he has to deal with the government of Roman Africa by the Arian Vandals, and by then the end of the succession of western emperors is in sight. Only one chapter of volume III relates the history of eastern empire, and in this the great crisis of the Nestorian controversy is invisible, having been postponed to a point in the *Decline and Fall* so distant¹ as to have no place in the fifth-century narrative. To complete chapter 27, Gibbon has to relate the end of Theodosius's reign and proceed to those of his disastrous sons; and this connects him once more with the *Decline* and its conventional explanations.

At the overthrow of Maximus, Theodosius has placed both prefectures of the western empire in the hands of the inexperienced (and now motherless) Valentinian II, with a powerful *magister militum*, the Frank Arbogast,² to exercise effective power. He marries Valentinian's sister Galla, and there is room for speculation as to what his dynastic plans may have been, and whether Arbogast finds himself in the sort of exposed position that so often drove those occupying them to assume the purple. Gibbon is content to term him a 'bold and crafty barbarian . . . determined either to rule or ruin the empire of the West'.³ Valentinian finds himself a puppet, appeals to both Ambrose and Theodosius, and perishes by either murder

¹ Chapter 47, which concludes volume IV (1788) and is situated at the midpoint of the reign of Heraclius (628), just before his encounter with the Muslim Arabs.

² Gibbon prefers the spelling 'Arbogastes'. ³ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 62.

or suicide (Gibbon after studying Godefroy decides for the former).⁴ Theodosius after two years' hesitation⁵ decides not to treat with Arbogast as he did with Maximus but to march against him. He mobilises an army of both legions and barbarians, significantly including Goths led by Alaric;⁶ it is suggested that he hopes to reduce their power by setting them in the forefront of the battle.⁷

Meanwhile Arbogast, in need of a front man to place before 'the provincials in whose breasts every sentiment of patriotism or loyalty was extinguished', has bestowed the purple on a distinguished rhetorician named Eugenius. In recent scholarship it has been suggested, and more recently still denied with great vehemence and at great length,⁸ that Eugenius enjoyed the support of the still pagan senatorial aristocracy of Rome, powerful enough to be considered as making a 'last stand of paganism' against the repressive Christianisation conducted by Theodosius. We cannot enquire whether Gibbon in his account of Arbogast and Eugenius lends support to this thesis, for the reason that he has chosen to defer the whole subject of the repression of paganism to chapter 28, where it is studied outside the narrative. Here he merely remarks in a footnote that Eugenius's 'secret attachment to Paganism . . . is probable in a grammarian',⁹ whose profession was the public and never proscribed teaching of pre-Christian literature.

Chapter 27, however, is not mere narrative, but proceeds through a number of themes with which the reader is already familiar. Theodosius at last marches against Arbogast, and the battle of the Frigidus furnishes the last triumph of an emperor in the west, and the last of that series of confrontations, recurrent since Mursa forty-five years before, between a formidable western army of Gauls and Germans – like those led by Magnentius, Vetranio, Julian and (until they deserted him) Maximus – and an eastern army of cavalry and archers. As usual, the latter triumph by a very narrow margin; Theodosius's Goths are worsted, and he is saved in a moment of despair only by the never-explained offer of Arbogast's flanking force to change sides, and by a sudden wind of hurricane force, perhaps both natural and miraculous. It is not the last of the great battles between the barbarised forces of the late empire, but it is the last in which a legitimate emperor defeats a western rival for the purple.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 63, n. 106. McLynn 1994, pp. 336–7, prefers suicide.

⁵ Gibbon tells at length (pp. 64–5) how, since 'the progress of Christianity had silenced the oracles of Delphi and Dodona', Theodosius sent an envoy to Upper Egypt to obtain a favourable prophecy from a Christian hermit.

⁶ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 65. ⁷ p. 66. ⁸ Cameron, 2011, pp. 1–801.

⁹ Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 63, n. 109.

Arbogast and Eugenius disposed of, Theodosius presents his younger son Honorius at Milan as the presumptive heir to the western empire, his elder brother Arcadius being already installed at Constantinople; but the emperor dies suddenly, and even had he lived to train them, Gibbon does not see reason to believe that either of his sons would have been in any way competent. His verdict on Theodosius begins:

The barbarians, whom he had vanquished, and the churchmen, by whom he had been subdued, celebrated with loud and sincere applause the qualities of the deceased emperor which appeared the most valuable in their eyes. The Romans – meaning those neither barbarous nor religious? –

were terrified by the impending dangers of a feeble and divided administration; and every disgraceful moment of the unfortunate reigns of Arcadius and Honorius revived the memory of their irreparable loss.¹⁰

Theodosius has failed where Marcus Aurelius, Diocletian and Constantine failed, in providing for a competent successor or successors; but it is worth noting that the armies are not involved in providing one, as they were at the deaths of Julian and Jovian. Gibbon proceeds in the rhetorical manner to set out Theodosius's good and bad qualities, but presents them in two contexts which may be considered those of historical change. The first is that of luxury, at first sight a topos of ancient thought. He selects Zosimus as blaming Theodosius for the universal corruption and effeminacy of his subjects; but this of course had been a commonplace since the time of Sallust, and remained one among the conventional moralists of Gibbon's own time. He criticises it in two ways which display the thinking we term Enlightened.

The complaints of contemporary writers, who deplore the increase of luxury and depravation of manners, are commonly expressive of their peculiar temper and situation. There are few observers who possess a clear and comprehensive view of the revolutions of society, and who are capable of discovering the nice and secret springs of action which impel, in the same uniform direction, the blind and capricious passions of a multitude of individuals.¹¹

The voice of Montesquieu is audible here, as is that of the young Gibbon who wrote the *Essai sur l'Etude de la Littérature*; we are in the presence of Enlightenment and the science of man. But the underlying causes which produce uniformity out of chaos are 'nice and secret', and something like a Tacitean understanding of human nature is required in order to discern them. The crooked timbers of humanity may be what is

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 69. ¹¹ *Ibid.*

uniformly present. And what is called for by late Roman history may be the perception of a political economy that was anything but modern.

If it can be affirmed, with any degree of truth, that the luxury of the Romans was more shameless and dissolute in the reign of Theodosius than in the age of Constantine, perhaps, or of Augustus, the alteration cannot be ascribed to any beneficial improvements which had gradually increased the stock of national riches. A long period of calamity or decay must have checked the industry and diminished the wealth of the people; and their profuse luxury must have been the result of that indolent despair which enjoys the present hour and declines the thoughts of futurity. The uncertain condition of their property discouraged the subjects of Theodosius from engaging in those useful and laborious undertakings which require an immediate expense, and promise a slow and distant advantage. The frequent examples of ruin and desolation tempted them not to spare the remains of a patrimony which might, every hour, become the prey of the rapacious Goth. And the mad prodigality which prevails in the confusion of a shipwreck or a siege may serve to explain the progress of luxury amidst the misfortunes and terrors of a sinking nation.¹²

Adam Smith no doubt approved this reminder that the late antique servile economy was not conducive to the wealth of nations (how often has Gibbon used the last word?). But earlier chapters of the *Decline and Fall* have had a great deal to say about over-taxation and the flight from land and office which does not appear here; and Gibbon seems to be giving no other explanation for the luxury of conspicuous expenditure than barbarian inroads and personal insecurity. It is possible to ask what function this passage is discharging, standing as it does near the end of the chapter, where the reign of Theodosius is being evaluated; the more so as it is followed by another, in which the concept of luxury is used with even less critical elaboration.

The effeminate luxury, which infected the manners of courts and cities, had installed a secret and destructive poison into the camps of the legions; and their degeneracy has been marked by the pen of a military writer, who had accurately studied the genuine and ancient principles of Roman discipline. It is the just and important observation of Vegetius, that the infantry was invariably covered with defensive armour from the foundation of the city to the reign of the emperor Gratian. The relaxation of discipline and the disuse of exercise rendered the soldiers less able and less willing to support the fatigues of the service; they complained of the weight of the armour, which they seldom wore; and they successively obtained the permission of laying aside both their cuirasses and their helmets. The heavy weapons of their ancestors, the short sword and the formidable *pilum*, which had subdued the world, insensibly dropped from their feeble hands . . . The cavalry of the Goths, the Huns, and the Alani, had felt the

¹² pp. 69–70.

benefits and adopted the use of defensive armour; and, as they excelled in the management of missile weapons, they easily overwhelmed the naked and trembling legions, whose heads and breasts were exposed, without defence, to the arrows of the barbarians. The loss of armies, the destruction of cities, and the dishonour of the Roman name, ineffectually solicited the successors of Gratian to restore the helmets and cuirasses of the infantry. The enervated soldiers abandoned their own and the public defence; and their pusillanimous indolence may be considered as the immediate cause of the downfall of the empire.¹³

So sonorously ends chapter 27 of the *Decline and Fall*. This is language we have met before. The ‘secret poison’ has occurred as far back as Gibbon’s second chapter,¹⁴ where it indicates the decline of every political and intellectual virtue as the loss of arms and liberty reduces the Romans to a ‘race of pygmies’. Here this process has infected the legions. Vegetius’s *Epitome rei militaris* (or *De re militare*), a work whose date is as elusive as its author’s identity,¹⁵ furnished much of the matter of chapter 1 of the *Decline and Fall*, where Gibbon reviewed the training, tactics and social character of the legions as they had been during the republic and remained under the emperors till perhaps the time of Trajan.¹⁶ He knew that Vegetius presented problems in anachronism; Lipsius had criticised him for describing the legions of one period as if they had been those of another;¹⁷ and their progressive decadence was part of a history that went back as far as the Gracchi.¹⁸ Vegetius, however, is either totally anachronistic or totally indifferent to chronology. On the one hand he presents everything that can be known about legions he himself describes as ancient; on the other, he is Gibbon’s authority for two important statements about the history of his own time. The first is the tale that the legions petitioned Gratian to allow them to cease wearing armour;¹⁹ Gibbon has said nothing about this in his account of Gratian’s reign, and indeed says that the emperor lost the confidence of his army through neglecting their customs.²⁰ The second is the assertion that the eastern barbarians – Goths, Alans and Huns – were wearing armour on horseback and relying on the missile weapons of their cavalry.²¹ The Huns must have come some way from the pony-riders of the steppe. Gibbon makes use of

¹³ p. 70. ¹⁴ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 83. ¹⁵ Milner, 1993, pp. xxi–xxv.

¹⁶ See Womersley, 1994, I, p. 41, where Gibbon makes it clear that the legions of the empire differed from those described by Polybius and that he is offering a description of ‘the Imperial legion’. Vegetius, he says, offers a ‘very perplexed abridgement’ (*ibid.*, n. 42); and he makes it clear (n. 43) that the legion was an infantry force.

¹⁷ In *De Militia Romana* (Milner, 1993, p. xiv). Gibbon owned the edition of Lipsius’s *Opera* published at Antwerp in 1637 (*Library*, p. 180).

¹⁸ *FDF*, ch. 3. ¹⁹ Milner, 1993, pp. 18–19. ²⁰ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 21.

²¹ Milner, 1993, p. 18. The *clibanarii* and elephants who figure in the defeats of Magnentius and Julian are not mentioned.

both statements; but it is Vegetius's premise that all that is needed is the re-creation of the infantry legion with its javelins (*pila*) and short swords (though he knows a great deal about its fortifications and artillery).

In defence of this premise, he tells us no more than that, as the disaster of Cannae was due to a decay of training after the first Punic war, so recovery from it was the result of a revival of training under Scipio.²² We need to ask, therefore, whether his *Epitome* is anything more than an exercise in rhetoric and grammar, no more a tract for the times than an appeal to ancient virtue. The question that next arises, however, is whether there is anything else to be said about Gibbon's use of Vegetius in the last paragraph of chapter 27. At no point in the *Decline and Fall*, either before or after this moment in its composition, does Gibbon have battle-pieces to recount in which naked and trembling legions, disarmed through their own degeneracy, are overwhelmed by the missiles of the armoured cavalry of the barbarians.²³ From Mursa to the Frigidus, the tale is how eastern forces armed and equipped in this fashion – whose origin is as much Persian as anything else – just succeed in overcoming the 'steady valour' of the western Gauls and Germans. If we are to suppose that these were no less barbarian than their opponents, their tactics may not have differed very much; and the point about the legions may be not that they were degenerate, but that they were simply not there – having ceased to exist, as indeed Gibbon following Zosimus had indicated in chapter 17.²⁴

The conclusion would follow that Vegetius (and perhaps Zosimus; they seem not to have known of one another) were not writing history but engaging in rhetorical exercises of the sort common in late antiquity, when ancient virtue became a counter-image to modern degeneracy, and history was written in order to construct the contending images. But it might further follow – even more subversively for the reading put forward in the present volume – that Gibbon, in winding up chapter 27 and the climactic reign of Theodosius, was doing no more himself, and that the concluding paragraph merely sets forth an ancient topos which had become a humanist one. With this in mind, we proceed to chapter 28, in which Theodosius becomes an actor in one more episode of the history of religion.

²² Vegetius, I, p. 28; Milner 1993, pp. 25–8.

²³ This is not to say that such defeats might not be found; Macmullen, 1988, ch. 4, reports them in great numbers. The point is that Gibbon does not enumerate them, and has no authority other than Vegetius for reporting them.

²⁴ Above, p. 37.

(II)

The ruin of Paganism, in the age of Theodosius, is perhaps the only example of the total extirpation of any ancient and popular superstition, and may therefore deserve to be considered as a singular event in the history of the human mind.²⁵

The opening sentence of chapter 28 raises expectations larger than Gibbon chose to fulfil. ‘The history of the human mind’ – otherwise *les progrès de l’esprit humain* – is a key term in Enlightenment thought, and may indicate the intention of reducing religion to a series of merely human inventions. It encourages us to look to the chapter it introduces for a full-scale history of religion in the Roman world: an account of how the species of religion here termed ‘paganism’ and ‘superstition’ arose, existed and disappeared, being replaced by another, equally a product of the ‘human mind’. In fact, this is not what we are about to receive; the key term ‘extirpation’ introduces a history of imperial and ecclesiastical actions, by which established religious practices that may be termed ‘paganism’, ‘superstition’, and – another key term – ‘polytheism’, were overthrown and caused to disappear, so that we are reading the history of empire and church as well as that of ‘the human mind’. The last is less of an actor in chapter 28 than the opening sentence may lead us to believe. Nevertheless, Gibbon had in various places written, and in sources important to him had read and alluded to, accounts of religion in the history of the mind which cannot be unmentioned as we explore this chapter. The history he could have written must be part of the history he did not write.

As far back as 1758–61, while writing the *Essai sur l’Etude de la Littérature*, Gibbon had confronted the extraordinary history of how the religion of the crucified Jesus had in a few centuries replaced the cults and worship of the Mediterranean world, and had decided that a philosophical rather than a scriptural history of religion was necessary to explain it. Like other writers on the subject, he had begun this history with *le sauvage*, the primitive hunter-gatherer in pursuit of what he could eat and in flight from what might eat him, who had populated the animate and inanimate objects around him with magical powers and mythologised these into demons, spirits and gods.²⁶ Polytheism was the primitive religion of mankind, and it will have been about that time that Gibbon encountered David Hume’s *Natural History of Religion* (1757²⁷), which he perhaps cites more often than any other of the philosopher’s works. Hume insisted that

²⁵ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 71.

²⁶ *EEG*, pp. 212–13, 234–6. For a modern critical edition of the *Etude*, with commentary, see now Mankin, 2010; here in particular pp. 68–75.

²⁷ Gibbon possessed three editions of Hume’s *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* (*Library*, p. 156), all later than 1757.

‘until about 1700 years ago’, polytheism was not only the primitive but the universal religion, and his purpose in saying this was to repudiate the Christian contention that antediluvian and post-diluvian mankind retained some memory of the original sovereignty of God, but had corrupted it in a great many ways leading to idolatry, false prophecy, false philosophy and many combinations of all three. This raised the problem, for both Christians and deists, of how the original superstitions of the savage had evolved (if that were the right word) into the diverse religions existing at the time of Christ’s appearance; Hume’s insistence that they were all polytheist might be true but was less than adequate.

Aiming to write only a ‘natural’ history of religion, Hume had needed to base it only in an analytical account of the workings of the human mind, in which polytheism alternated with monotheism and – as he had explained in another essay, of equal importance to Gibbon²⁸ – superstition with enthusiasm. Natural history, however, occurred in the multiple contexts of the ‘civil’ history provided by the records of human societies – some of which did not deserve to be called civil – and there were narratives which natural history could not avoid mentioning. Hume’s implied suggestion that Christianity, appearing 1,700 years before his time, was the first monotheism can have been little more than coat-trailing; what after all of Judaism? And there were both Christian and philosophic enquiries into the origin of heathen monotheisms. Stadial histories of society – here barely mentioned by either Hume or Gibbon – might suggest new religions, appearing as savages were superseded by shepherds. Perhaps the Tartar or the Arab, guiding his herds (or following his trade wagons) across an infinite plain under an infinite sky, might contemplate the starry heavens without and the moral law within, and conceive – or, said the Christian, remember – that the one had created the other, to the exclusion of any *daimones*, *atua* or *kami* supposed below. Creator and creature, spirit and matter, sky-father and earth-mother, might begin to be differentiated; but the problem of creation, as studied by Beausobre,²⁹ now made its appearance. The shepherd or the shaman, the druid or the lama, might worship heaven and earth as a unity, or as a duality imperfectly separated, and primitive versions of gnosticism, Manichaeism, and even Spinozism might be formulated by philosopher-legislators such as Zoroaster.³⁰ Neither Hume nor Gibbon in chapter 28, however, pays attention to this possibility, and it is relevant that we here encounter a hiatus in stadial theory: that between the shepherd peoples coming out of Scythia and the

²⁸ ‘Of Superstition and Enthusiasm’ (Miller, 1985, pp. 73–9). For Gibbon’s references to Hume in the *Decline and Fall*, Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1227.

²⁹ *RFT*, ch. 5. ³⁰ *BSE*, ch. 2.

foundation of cities around the Mediterranean basin.³¹ The paganism and superstition whose extirpation makes chapter 28 an event in the history of the human mind are overwhelmingly – even though *paganus* was known to mean ‘rustic’ or ‘peasant’ – the religions, or rather cults, of the city peoples of the late Roman empire, and above all of Rome itself. How these cities had been founded, and how they had found the gods they worshipped, was not explained in detail by the available histories of the human mind, and it was therefore the harder to explain what had happened in that mind as these cults were extirpated by the new religion and its alliance of church and state.

Gibbon knew, though he does not systematically cite, a number of modern texts that offered insights to the origins of ancient city polytheism. In Louis de Beaufort’s *La République Romaine* he would have read that the original ‘Celtic’ peoples populating Europe practised deistically acceptable religions of benign sun-worship, and that Numa Pompilius, successor to the enigmatic Romulus, had established one such when second king of Rome. Darker and more warlike forms of worship had been introduced by the Etruscan Tarquins and continued, with Greek and Egyptian admixtures, by the noble families who overthrew the kings and established the republic.³² Gibbon could, just conceivably, have been reminded here of William Howel’s monarchist conviction that both the Athenian and the Roman republics were warlike and imperialist by nature.³³ The religion of the republic, Beaufort continued, had maintained its *libertas* and *virtus* until the age after the Gracchi, when the *populus* perceived that the *senatus* was false to its own values, and the Decline and Fall began. The paganism to be extirpated in chapter 28 includes, though it is not identical with, the religion of the Capitol and its ancient rituals, maintained by a senatorial aristocracy which no longer practises the virtue the religion symbolises.

Gibbon will also have known of the counter-thesis, presented by William Warburton in the *Divine Legation of Moses* and by East Apthorp in his critique of chapters 15 and 16 of the *Decline and Fall*,³⁴ according to which the religion of the ancient city consisted of the worship of its own sociability rather than its warlike discipline, and was therefore more Ciceronian than it was Catonian. In the post-diluvian world, Warburton suggested, the barbarians of the north might retain something of the monotheism natural to Mosaic mankind, while the citizens of the south developed a polytheism far removed from that of the primitive savage, in which there was a ritual and a household deity for every practice of civil

³¹ Adam Smith’s is the most developed account (see *NCG*, p. xii).

³² *FDF*, pp. 360–71. ³³ Howel, 1680, pp. 77 (Athens), 775–6 (Rome).

³⁴ *RFT*, pp. 230–7, 336–47.

society. Its philosophic extension – once the leisured intellect developed one – was towards pantheism rather than monotheism: if there was a god for everything, everything might be God; and Gibbon had questioned Warburton's belief that a secret cult of personal immortality had persisted.³⁵ But Warburton was even more lucid than Gibbon – if it be accepted that Warburton could be lucid at all – in explaining that urban polytheism was tolerant because the possibility of intolerance had not yet appeared, all statements about the gods being poetic rather than philosophic and therefore incapable of contradiction. Apthorp joined him here, and we reach the point where the narrative of chapter 28 begins.

In chapters 15 and 16 Gibbon had insisted on the tolerant, or rather proto-tolerant, nature of urban polytheism, but equally on its rejection by the early Christians who saw its multiple gods as a legion of malignant demons. They were for the first time in history intolerant, and had been, paradoxically, persecuted by a civil society for rejecting its universal toleration. This was no news to Warburton or Apthorp, but Gibbon added the Humean proposition that the Christians were enthusiasts, worshipping a God to be found only in their own perceptions, and so asserting a liberty that might easily claim authority over others. Since the age of the persecutions, a great deal had happened. Their initial enthusiasm had been invaded by theological debate, and their alliance with imperial authority had tempted both bishops and emperors to engage in the persecution of theologies deemed false and subversive; chapter 28 relates the move from persecution of heresy to persecution of paganism. At the same time, however, the church's alliance with the state had brought it closer to a civil society whose culture and history remained based in polytheism. There had been the significant episode of the failure and non-renewal of Julian's attempt to exclude Christians from the schools of rhetoric, where a pagan and polytheist literature as old as Homer was studied as a necessary qualification for entry into the governing class; if Christians desired to engage in this culture, they must modify their primitive puritanism and enthusiasm. Their assault on paganism must be selective.

It follows that chapter 28 does not relate a 'history of the human mind' in the broad sense, but rather, as Gibbon indeed states, 'a singular event' within it. We are not to learn how the habits of that mind changed in such a way that ancient polytheism became no longer thinkable, but how an 'ancient and popular superstition' was 'extirpated' by the joint action of church and state; the chapter continues what has become a dominant

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

theme in Gibbon's mind, that of how Constantinian Christianity became under Theodosius a persecuting religion. There is, however, to be a sequel: the invasion of Christianity by new forms of superstition and polytheism; and to relate how this happens, Gibbon must resort to both the 'natural' or philosophical history of Hume and the highly sceptical ecclesiastical history of Conyers Middleton. The chapter both continues and enlarges themes found in its predecessor.

(III)

From the opening sentence and 'the history of the human mind', chapter 28 proceeds without a break to depict sacerdotal Christianity as committed to the persecution of what has been termed 'paganism'. Gibbon has already reminded his readers that this is a loose and traditional term, and it will take on more than one meaning in the course of the chapter; but that is not the point immediately important.

The Christians, more especially the clergy, had impatiently supported the prudent delays of Constantine and the equal toleration of the elder Valentinian; nor could they deem their conquest perfect or secure as long as their adversaries were permitted to exist. The influence which Ambrose and his brethren had acquired over the youth of Gratian and the piety of Theodosius was employed to infuse the maxims of persecution into the breasts of their Imperial proselytes. Two specious principles of religious jurisprudence were established, from whence they deduced a direct and rigorous conclusion against the subjects of the empire who still adhered to the ceremonies of their ancestors; *that* the magistrate is, in some measure, guilty of the crimes which he neglects to prohibit or to punish; and *that* the idolatrous worship of fabulous deities and real daemons is the most abominable crime against the supreme majesty of the Creator. The laws of Moses and the examples of Jewish history were hastily, perhaps erroneously, applied by the clergy to the mild and universal reign of Christianity. The zeal of the emperors was excited to vindicate their own honour and that of the Deity; and the temples of the Roman world were subverted about sixty years after the conversion of Constantine.³⁶

In Gibbon's mind – from which it is easy to generalise about 'enlightenment' in general – the immediate and practical issue was always that of toleration; but behind it lay the foundation of modern history in the intrusion of spiritual (and clerical) authority upon civil magistracy. The dominant theme in recent chapters has been the use of conjoint authority to establish theological orthodoxy and prohibit heresy; but here, at an ending-point in the history of empire, Gibbon is reverting to a theme

³⁶ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 71. Gibbon's emphases.

which we have heard little since [chapter 16](#): the origin of persecution in the emergence of monotheism in a culture otherwise polytheist. This is the language of Hume's *Natural History*; but in the multi-thematic universe of civil and recorded history, the dialectic is not quite so simple, since both polytheism and monotheism can be – and the latter must resist being – enlarged into a pantheism in which everything is God and creator cannot be fully distinct from creation. This possibility is occasionally visible in chapter 28, as part of the case for what is being termed 'paganism', and as limiting the extent to which the latter could be 'extirpated'. There is a gap, also, between Gibbon's reference to 'the ceremonies of their ancestors' and his description of Roman religion as an 'ancient and popular superstition'. Ceremonies are not necessarily superstitious, and those in use at Rome itself were as much senatorial as they were popular. 'Paganism' is taking on a diversity of characters, and this will be found to complicate the meanings of Gibbon's concluding reference to 'the temples of the Roman world'. Finally, it is to be noted that he calls the persecution of polytheism an intrusion on 'the mild and universal reign of Christianity', language more like that of a liberal churchman than any he has used before, and not obviously borne out by the description of early Christianity in chapters 15 and 16. Mosheim had used it, and Maclaine had injected it into Mosheim;³⁷ is it a tolerationist cliché Gibbon is employing as a rhetorical artifice?

Again without a break, he proceeds to enumerate the priestly colleges of the Roman republic, all of which had continued to exist until the time of Gratian, as essential to the Augustan claim that the principate enjoyed a legitimacy derived from Roman history and public laws. Here paganism, polytheism and superstition join in achieving their real purpose, 'the religious worship of the state';³⁸ it does not much matter whether the ignorant vulgar believe in the reality of the gods whose totems are worshipped, since the object of veneration is the continuity of the *res publica* at worship. For the same reason, it does not matter if the leisured and learned senators are philosophical sceptics, though it will matter very much if an actual atheism makes them cynics regarding the values of the republic itself; and this is known to have happened. What is and must be held divine is the military, legal and political virtue of the republic's citizens, and the case for the ancient religion is that it makes public the worship of this divinity (of which the emperor may be the expression). It will be this religion that Orosius and Augustine, in the aftermath of the looting of Rome by the Goths in 410, are most anxious to see discredited

³⁷ *RFT*, ch. 6. ³⁸ Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 72–3.

and not restored;³⁹ but in the last years of Theodosius it is still the religion of the senatorial aristocracy of Rome and Italy. Since the time of Domitian if not earlier, the senate has been ‘a venerable but useless monument of antiquity’,⁴⁰ playing no part in government and seldom visited by the emperors; but its members remain vastly wealthy and influential and continue to symbolise legitimacy. It is a question whether they are not an active political force in the last years of the reign and the empire.

The issue is that of the altar of Victory, on which senators make offerings in swearing to obey the emperor and the laws. Its symbolism is pagan and totemic, and emperors have removed and restored it as their attitudes towards Christianity change. Gibbon leaves it unclear why, since he holds that only a minority of senators were Christians, there should be repeated embassies to Gratian, Valentinian I and Theodosius requesting restoration of the altar to the senate-house; but he adds ‘in that assembly the dying embers of freedom were, for a moment, revived and inflamed by the breath of fanaticism’.⁴¹ His language is Humean, compressed and telescoped to a point near to confusion. On the one hand, he has insisted with Warburton that polytheism, which here he is calling superstition, is incapable of fanaticism; on the other, Hume has laid it down that enthusiasm, for which fanaticism is nearly a synonym, is the natural ally of freedom. It is difficult, however, to apply the epithet ‘fanaticism’ to the arguments of Quintus Aurelius Symmachus, the spokesman of the senate. A distinguished senator and pontifex – it is important to Gibbon that Roman priesthoods were civil magistracies – his character was respected by his Christian opponents (including Ambrose). Gibbon, perhaps with Tillemont in mind, says they ‘lamented the inefficacy of his moral virtues’.⁴² His case for restoration of the altar rests principally on use, custom and tradition, respect for which binds ruler and ruled together, but is not without philosophical foundation. All things, he says, are full of God (*omnia quidem deo plena sunt*), but

suus enim cuique, mos suus ritus est: varios custodes urbibus cultus mens divina distribuit; ut animae nascentibus, ita populis fatales genii dividuntur.

[Everyone has his own customs, his own religious practices; the divine mind has assigned to different cities different religions to be their guardians. Each man is given at birth a separate soul; in the same way each people is given its own special genius to take care of its destiny.⁴³]

But only by experience, Symmachus continues in terms Hume must have applauded, can humans come to know that the gods exist; and each

³⁹ *FDF*, ch. 5. ⁴⁰ *FDF*, p. 479; Womersley, 1994, I, p. 387.

⁴¹ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 74. ⁴² *Ibid.* ⁴³ Barrow, 1973, pp. 36–9.

people must learn this through the history to which its genius guides it. To abandon its gods is to abandon its experience and its self; the case for polytheism is empirically founded. We are, however, at the moment pinpointed by Warburton, at which polytheism is based in pantheism; all things are full of divinity and it can be known only through them. About this Gibbon says as little as he can, and is at pains to redirect philosophy towards historic experience.

Even scepticism is made to supply an apology for superstition. The great and incomprehensible *secret* of the universe eludes the inquiry of man. Where reason cannot instruct, custom may be permitted to guide; and every nation seems to construct the dictates of prudence, by a faithful attachment to those rites and opinions which have received the sanction of ages.⁴⁴

One can understand, reading this passage, why Gibbon a decade later, writing in a world turned upside down by the French Revolution and Burke's *Reflections* upon it, aligned himself with the latter and remarked in a letter:

The primitive Church, which I have treated with some freedom, was itself at that time an innovation, and *I* was attached to the old Pagan establishment.⁴⁵

Symmachus went on to disapprove the imperial seizure of the treasures belonging to the various priesthoods – in particular the Vestals – and to ask what good could accrue to the state from arbitrary interference with testaments freely given by the ancestors.⁴⁶ A reader in 1791 might think of Burke's denunciation of the seizure of the lands of the French church.⁴⁷ Gibbon forgave Burke for his reverence for church establishments;⁴⁸ but his forgiveness rested on grounds almost but not quite deistic. The divine could be imagined anywhere and humans must arrive at their own definition of it; but this did not mean that religion (in particular monotheism) was natural to the intellect. The choice of a deity was prudential and experiential. What Symmachus and those like him found incredible was the Christian insistence that a universal divinity, escaping all definition, could be approached only through the long dead Jesus of Nazareth.

Gibbon went on to tell the unlikely tale, for which the pagan Zosimus and the Christian poet Prudentius – neither of whom he respected – were his only authorities, that Theodosius convened the senate and obliged them to choose between religions, with the result that Christ triumphed

⁴⁴ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 75.

⁴⁵ *Letters*, 3, p. 216 (dated 2 February 1791). Gibbon's emphasis.

⁴⁶ Barrow, 1973, pp. 40–7.

⁴⁷ Pocock, 1985, pp. 200–5; 1957/1987, pp. xxvii–xxxi, 99–109. ⁴⁸ See n. 45.

over Jupiter by a handsome majority.⁴⁹ He seems to accept this story, but gives a more gradualist account of the Christianisation of the senate,

gradually fixed in the new religion, as the cause of the ancient became more hopeless; they yielded to the authority of the emperor, to the fashion of the times, and to the entreaties of their wives and children, who were instigated and governed by the clergy of Rome and the monks of the East.⁵⁰

We are still in the domain of ecclesiastical rather than philosophical history; but the emphasis has begun to move from Rome to the provinces and from bishops to monks.

The decrees of the senate, which proscribed the worship of idols, were ratified by the general consent of the Romans, the splendour of the Capitol was defaced; and the solitary temples were abandoned to ruin and contempt. Rome submitted to the yoke of the Gospel; and the vanquished provinces had not yet lost their reverence for the name and authority of Rome.⁵¹

Gibbon – or so he recalled – had originally conceived the idea of writing the *Decline and Fall* of the city, rather than the empire, while seated among the ruins of the Capitol, and hearing friars singing Vespers in a church which had once been a pagan temple. There already existed at that time a literature that enquired into the deterioration of the great buildings of Rome, and speculated whether it had been caused by barbarian vandalism or Christian neglect – whether, as the poet Pope put it, ‘the monks finished what the Goths began’ – and in his concluding chapter years later, Gibbon returned to the question and concluded that time and random damage were probably more important than either.⁵² At the midpoint of chapter 28, we find him concerned with the same problem and finding cause to emphasise the Christian role. It is part, however, of another question: the complex relations between persecution and toleration. Since polytheism is not a religion of belief, no one is directly commanded to renounce belief in the gods and there are no pagan martyrs. Since it is a religion of ritual, what is prohibited is the public performance of sacrifices and the exhibition of images which the Christians call idols; and senators who have not become Christians are acceptable in public office (like Symmachus) and welcome to the emperor’s councils and hospitality. Temples, however, are public buildings and public property, and once rituals and sacrifices are forbidden, they may be abandoned to neglect. At Rome itself, the issue is that of co-existence between the imperial office and a wealthy and influential senatorial aristocracy whose Christianisation is never quite complete.

⁴⁹ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 76. ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 77. ⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *DF*, ch. 71; the whole chapter. See also below, p. 361.

It is another matter in the Greek, Egyptian and Syrian east, where paganism is not the worship of material Rome and ecclesiastical energy is in other hands than those of the senate and people.

Gibbon cites a series of decrees in which Theodosius commands the suppression of sacrifices and the confiscation of temple property in all provinces of the empire. He leaves uncertain what is to become of the temples themselves, and certainly does not intend their general destruction; but a 'torrent of enthusiasm and rapine'⁵³ is directed against them by bishops, mobs and monks, the latter emerging from the Syrian hills and the Egyptian deserts to become major actors in Gibbon's history of Christianity. Solitary contemplation and mortification are forms of enthusiasm, and enthusiasm, being the rejection of society, can become violence against society itself. Monks, invading the cities as they have not been forbidden to do, play the role of the *circumcelliones* of Africa, and are active in the destruction of temples. Monasticism has been mainly an eastern phenomenon, but even in Gaul Martin of Tours marches 'at the head of his faithful monks to destroy the idols, the temples and the consecrated trees of his extensive diocese'.⁵⁴ He faces a barbarian rather than an urban polytheism, but in the east the ancient religions are less the worship of Rome than the expression of Hellenistic city culture, Greek, Egyptian and Syrio-Iranian. Their defender is not the Roman Symmachus but the Antiochene Libanius, who has played several parts in Gibbon's history. His *Oratio pro templis* presents a history of religion in an ancient version of stadial theory.

'The first men who appeared on earth', he says, 'occupied the high places' (Machiavelli's *rozzi montanari*)

and soon gained a notion of gods and realized how much their good will means to mankind. They raised the kind of temples to be expected of primitive man, and made idols for themselves. As their culture advanced towards urbanization (τῶν πραγμάτων δε εἰς πόλεις προελθόντων) and building techniques became adequate for it, many cities made their appearance at the mountain's foot or on the plains, and in each and every one of them the first buildings to be erected after the wall were shrines and temples, for they believed that from such governance they would have the utmost protection . . . And it was with these gods to aid them that the Romans used to march against the foe, engage them in battle, conquer them and, as conquerors, grant the vanquished a condition of life better than that which they had before their defeat, removing their fears and allowing them a share in their own civic life.⁵⁵

⁵³ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 79. ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Norman, 1969/1987, pp. 102–5 (Greek text and English translation). For the *rozzi montanari* see Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra Tito Livio*, II, 5.

Libanius goes on to record how successive emperors – Julian always the exception – have prohibited sacrifice but allowed the burning of incense in temples still open, and to launch an invective against the hordes of monks who deface the temples and even attempt their destruction. This happens in the cities and even more damagingly in the countryside, since

whenever they tear out a temple from an estate (ἀγρος), that estate is blinded and lies murdered. Temples are the soul of the countryside (ψυχή γάρ τοις ἀγροῖς ταῖς ἱεραῖς); they mark the beginning of its settlement, and have been passed down through many generations to the men of today. In them the farming communities rest their hopes for husbands, wives, children, for their oxen and the soil they saw and plant. An estate that has suffered so has lost the inspiration of the peasantry (τῶν γεωργῶν) together with their hopes, for they believe that their labour will be in vain once they are robbed of the gods who direct their labours to their due end.⁵⁶

Libanius seems – and so would an eighteenth-century reader understand him – to be supposing a free and industrious rather than a servile tenantry. However that may be, there could be no more specific assertion of the identity of the gods with civil society. Gibbon several times cites this oration, though not the passage just quoted. Many chapters later, Libanius warns the emperor that if the sacking of temples is not put down he must expect the owners of land – not now οἱ γεωργοὶ but τοὺς τῶν ἀγρῶν δεσποτάς – to defend themselves and their property.⁵⁷ From other sources (Sozomen and Theodoret) Gibbon tells the tale of Marcellus bishop of Apamea, who led both soldiers and gladiators in a ‘crusade’ against the temples of his diocese, until ‘he was surprised and slain by a body of exasperated rustics’⁵⁸ – very much the peasants Libanius had in mind. But the monks were generally the victors.

A small number of temples was protected by the fears, the venality, the taste, or the prudence of the civil and ecclesiastical governors . . . But in almost every province of the Roman world, an army of fanatics, without authority and without discipline, invaded the peaceful inhabitants; and the ruin of the fairest structures of antiquity still displays the ravages of *those* barbarians who alone had time and inclination to execute such laborious destruction.⁵⁹

In monks, though not in all ecclesiastics, barbarism and religion become one, with the latter ascendant; and almost everywhere, though not in Rome itself, the destruction of antique visual culture is the work of Christian fanatics.

⁵⁶ Norman, 1969/1987, pp. 108–11. ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 150–1.

⁵⁸ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 80. ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 80–1. Gibbon’s emphasis.

(IV)

Gibbon completes this part of his story by relating in full⁶⁰ the bishop of Alexandria's destruction of the statue, temple (and library) of Serapis, an Egyptian deity more Ptolemaic than Pharaonic. He seems to tell the tale more because it is picturesque and dramatic, and because the histories have told it in full, than because it leads to the next theme of his chapter, which is the apparently unsuccessful but mysteriously triumphant survival of polytheism under Christian persecution. Forbidden to sacrifice in the temples, 'the inhabitants of the country'⁶¹ – Gibbon is not more specific than this – gather in open-air festivals, where they slaughter and devour animals under pretence that their behaviour is convivial rather than religious. Theodosius issues new edicts against sacrifice and divination, and Gibbon observes that a religion without theological or philosophic content cannot survive once its rituals are prohibited, since these are the only means by which it becomes real to the ignorant vulgar. 'In the cruel reigns of Decius and Diocletian',⁶² the ritual of state had persecuted the enthusiasm which denied it, and had provoked martyrdom; but in the reigns of Constantine and Theodosius, it was unpardonable, and even absurd, for a Christianity termed fanatical to proceed against paganisms incapable of martyrdom or fanaticism.

Had the Pagans been animated by the undaunted zeal which possessed the minds of the primitive believers, the triumph of the church must have been stained with blood; and the martyrs of Jupiter and Apollo might have embraced the glorious opportunity of devoting their lives and fortunes at the foot of the altars. But such obstinate zeal was not congenial to the loose and careless temper of Polytheism. The violent and repeated strokes of the orthodox princes were broken by the soft and yielding substance against which they were directed; and the ready obedience of the Pagans protected them from the pains and penalties of the Theodosian Code . . . The churches were filled with the increasing multitude of these unworthy proselytes, who had conformed, from temporal motives, to the reigning religion; and whilst they devoutly imitated the postures and recited the prayers of the faithful, they satisfied their conscience –

we might ask if they had one that troubled them –

by the silent and sincere invocation of the gods of antiquity.⁶³

Gibbon cites Libanius here.⁶⁴ The polytheist might conform to a new religion because it was the emperor's, and might ignore its commands to abandon his other gods as devils. It might be a sign of weakness no less

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 80–5. The bishop is Theophilus, the 'bold, bad man' who recurs in later chapters. See below, p. 376.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 85. ⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 87. ⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 87–8. ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, nn. 53, 58, 59, 61, 63.

than strength in the orthodox regime that it could afford, but could not evade, accepting ‘declared and devout Pagans’ among its senior servants, and found itself tolerating – did it even know that it was tolerating? – ‘the historical and philosophic remains of Eunapius, Zosimus, and the fanatic teachers of the school of Plato’,⁶⁵ in which the intellectual defence of the various polytheisms continued when the public practice had been extirpated. In admitting that there was this much of a *modus vivendi*, Gibbon comes as close as he ever does to acknowledging, while denying, the idea that there was a ‘last stand of paganism’ defeated at the battle of the Frigidus.

The Pagans of the West, without contributing to the elevation of Eugenius, disgraced by their partial attachment the cause and character of the usurper. The clergy vehemently exclaimed that he aggravated the crime of rebellion by the guilt of apostasy; that, by his permission, the altar of Victory was again restored; and that the idolatrous symbols of Jupiter and Hercules were displayed in the field against the invisible standard of the cross. But the vain hopes of the Pagans were soon annihilated by the defeat of Eugenius; and they were left exposed to the resentment of the conqueror,⁶⁶

which they had done something to deserve, while doing nothing to make their hopes effective. Chapter 28 is a history of intolerance and repression, but not one of persecution and martyrdom; it is nearing the point where Christianity can tolerate a nostalgia for the literature and art of polytheism, which its toleration ensures will remain no more than a nostalgia. In the centuries now beginning, however, it will become the foundation of Christian humanism.

Gibbon now performs a remarkable piece of footwork, in which – following perhaps the most suggestive of the pagan histories – he appears to deny with one hand what he has just asserted with the other. He begins philosophically:

The ignorant vulgar, whose minds are still agitated by the blind hopes and terrors of superstition –

Gibbon has said little of the Lucretian doctrine that religion perpetuates fear, and has been ready to regard it as the cement of sociability –

will be soon persuaded by their superiors to direct their vows to the reigning deities of the age –

note the plural; but it is monotheism the Roman vulgar are directed to accept –

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 89. ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

and will insensibly imbibe an ardent zeal for the support and propagation of the new doctrine, which spiritual hunger at first compelled them to accept.

Is spiritual hunger the root of superstition?

The generation that arose in the world after the promulgation of the Imperial laws was attracted within the pale of the Catholic Church; and so rapid, yet so gentle, was the fall of Paganism, that only twenty-eight years after the death of Theodosius the faint and minute vestiges were no longer visible to the eye of the legislator.⁶⁷

The ruin of the Pagan religion is described by the sophists⁶⁸ as a dreadful and amazing prodigy, which covered the earth with darkness and the ancient dominion of chaos and of night. They relate in solemn and pathetic strains that the temples were converted into sepulchres, and that the holy places, which had been adorned by the statues of the gods, were basely polluted by the relics of Christian martyrs. 'The monks' (a race of filthy animals, to whom Eunapius is tempted to refuse the name of men) 'are the authors of the new worship which, in the place of those deities who are conceived by the understanding,⁶⁹ has substituted the meanest and most contemptible of slaves. The heads, salted and pickled, of those infamous malefactors, who for the multitude of their crimes have suffered a just and ignominious death; their bodies, still marked by the impression of the lash and the scars of those tortures which were inflicted by the sentence of the magistrate; such' (continues Eunapius) 'are the gods which the earth produces in our days; such are the martyrs, the supreme arbitrators of our prayers and petitions to the Deity, whose tombs are now consecrated as the objects of the veneration of the people.'⁷⁰ Without approving the malice, it is natural enough to share the surprise of the sophist, the spectator of a revolution which raised those obscure victims of the laws of Rome to the rank of celestial and invisible protectors of the Roman empire.⁷¹

This is as savagely anti-Christian a passage as any found in the *Decline and Fall*, and a conventional reading of Gibbon tempts us to see in it an intimation of his own sentiments. It is more instructive, however, to read it as a series of historical explanations and narratives. In the first place, Gibbon is returning to the problem – as old as his youthful *Essai* and confronted, however unsatisfactorily, in chapters 15 and 16 – of explaining the speed and completeness of Christianity's becoming the religion of the Roman world, and, bypassing the claim that it triumphed through its revealed and inherent truth, he is in this passage presenting it as spreading

⁶⁷ n. 67 (p. 89) somewhat modifies this statement.

⁶⁸ Gibbon's plural. His source here is Eunapius's *Lives of the Sophists* (Wright, 1921–89).

⁶⁹ Presumably a neo-Platonist statement, but rather Gibbon's rendering than any made directly by Eunapius. 'Perceived by the intellect' might be substituted.

⁷⁰ If this is Gibbon's translation of Eunapius's Greek (Wright 1921–89, pp. 422–5) it is a very free paraphrase indeed, greatly enlarged into rhetoric. Wright gives a modern translation.

⁷¹ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 90.

through the superstition (but also through the spiritual hunger) of populations rapidly deprived by despotic action of their old gods and in need of new 'reigning deities of the age'. To become a religion of the vulgar, as both the regime and the masses demand, what began as enthusiasm must continue as superstition, and Gibbon is able to claim that the martyrs are the new gods of a monotheism transforming itself to a multi-layered polytheism.

In the last footnote to chapter 28 he cites 'Dr Middleton's agreeable letter from Rome', i.e. Conyers Middleton's *A Letter from Rome, Shewing an Exact Conformity between Popery and Paganism* (1729). Middleton (a crucial figure in the interpretation of Gibbon's life and beliefs⁷²) had reinforced the Protestant repudiation of the vision of God as surrounded by an army of saints and martyrs, capable of intercession in the spiritual world and the working of miracles in the material, by arguing that these mythical actors were the gods, genii and daimones of pagan antiquity, reimagined and rewritten by a Christianity in process of becoming a mythography. Gibbon employs Eunapius to construct a historical location of this process in the era after Theodosius's prohibition of temple worship both Roman and oriental, and in doing so is so much in accord with Protestant beliefs at large that no reader of volume III seems to have objected to his account of the spread of visions and miracles which accompanied the cult of the martyrs. In his much later *Free Inquiry* (1749) Middleton's attack on the ascription of miraculous powers to the early church had focused on the period immediately succeeding the apostles, but had raised doubts about what he (and Gibbon) believed regarding the miracles of Jesus Christ;⁷³ but the *Letter from Rome* and Gibbon's chapter 28 were no more than accounts of the origins of popish superstition arising three centuries later, and would be read with approval by all Protestants. If they lack the Socinian or deist implications of Middleton's *Free Inquiry*, they return us to the point where – so Gibbon tells us in the *Memoirs*⁷⁴ – he briefly accepted the modernity of miracles and converted to the Catholic church. He denounces the revival of miracles here, but makes no mention (as he does nowhere but in the *Memoirs*) of their role in his expulsion from Oxford and England in 1755. Nor has Gibbon yet found occasion to mention the origins of the papacy itself; but here he writes:

⁷² Trevor-Roper, 2010, ch. 5; Young in Mortimer and Robertson, 2012, pp. 235–65; *RFT*, pp. 219–30.

⁷³ *RFT*, pp. 222–3, 228–9.

⁷⁴ For this episode and Middleton's possible role in it, see *EEG*, pp. 45–9; *RFT*, pp. 219–21.

In the long period of twelve hundred years, which elapsed between the reign of Constantine and the reformation of Luther, the worship of saints and relics corrupted the pure and perfect simplicity of the Christian model

whatever Gibbon took that to have been;

and some symptoms of degeneracy may be observed even in the first generations which adopted and cherished this pernicious innovation.⁷⁵

A great figure, whom we might wish to rank among Gibbon's peers, stands among the symptoms of degeneracy. Gibbon relates with a straight face how the spirit of Gamaliel revealed in a vision the burial place of Stephen the first martyr, and how

The grave and learned Augustin, whose understanding scarcely admits the excuse of credulity, has attested the innumerable prodigies which were performed in Africa by the relics of St Stephen; and this marvellous narrative is inserted in the elaborate work of the City of God, which the bishop of Hippo designed as a solid and immortal proof of the truth of Christianity.⁷⁶

A footnote to this passage runs:

Augustin composed the two-and-twenty books de Civitate Dei in the space of thirteen years, A.D. 413–426 ... His learning is too often borrowed, and his arguments are too often his own;⁷⁷ but the whole work claims the merit of a magnificent design, vigorously, and not unskilfully, executed.⁷⁸

It is hard to read this patronising dismissal without reflecting that the *Civitas Dei* began as a response to Alaric's plundering of Rome in 410, a central moment in the Decline and Fall and Gibbon's history of it; or that the *Civitas Dei* and the *Decline and Fall* are to be read as answering one another in asserting that spiritual and secular history do and do not cancel each other out. Is Gibbon refusing to confront Augustine as his great opponent, or is it the belief in miracles and nothing else that weighs with him at this point in his history? What other references to Augustine we shall find may leave this question unanswered.

Gibbon explored, accurately and without evident mockery, the problems of immortality and agency which arose from supposing that saints and martyrs were active – whether as intercessors or as thaumaturges, whether through their relics or in their spiritual persons – in the presence of God after their deaths and before their resurrection (the last a point of

⁷⁵ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 92. ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁷⁷ It is a melancholy example of what careless copy-editing and proof-reading can do to the work of a great scholar that when Jaroslav Pelikan's Rauschenbusch Lectures were in process of publication an unknown hand inserted the word 'not' after the word 'often', thus destroying Gibbon's devastating judgement (Pelikan, 1987, pp. [13] and 17).

⁷⁸ Womersley, 1994, p. 93, n. 79.

doctrine on which he had little to say). He cited Gilbert Burnet's *De Statu Mortuorum* on whether they retained agency or were with God only,⁷⁹ and the contemporary Vigilantius, 'the protestant of his age', who was sternly rebuked by Jerome for questioning the ubiquity of departed spirits.⁸⁰ But there is also a footnote running 'Mr Hume . . . observes, like a philosopher, the natural flux and reflux of polytheism and theism',⁸¹ and this raises a question that recurs in the later *Decline and Fall*. Superstition, which might occur in either, imagined the presence of spirit in material and temporal objects, and though conducive to priestcraft anchored religion in the social world, rather than in the unfettered imaginings of the mind's enthusiasm. David Hume confessed to having more sympathy for the ritualised worship promoted by Archbishop Laud than for the austere enthusiasm of the puritans who restored freedom by destroying him;⁸² in the end the mind must return to the disciplines of sociability. In volume v of the *Decline and Fall*, the popes of all people will restore a little liberty to Italy by upholding the veneration of images against the despotic enthusiasm of the iconoclast emperors.⁸³ None of this, however, appears in chapter 28.

The imagination, which had been raised by a painful effort to the contemplation and worship of the Universal Cause, eagerly embraced such inferior objects of adoration as were more proportioned to its gross conceptions and imperfect faculties. The sublime and simple theology of the primitive Christians –

once again –

was gradually corrupted; and the MONARCHY of heaven, already clouded by metaphysical subtleties, was degraded by the introduction of a popular mythology which tended to restore the reign of polytheism.⁸⁴

Gibbon was Socinian or deist enough, subject to his essential scepticism, to prefer a sublime and simple monotheism to the pantheism of the philosophic pagans; but he saw Catholicism as the disguised return of pagan superstition. A set phrase of ancient historiography concludes the chapter and the reign of Theodosius.

The religion of Constantine achieved, in less than a century, the final conquest of the Roman empire: but the victors themselves were insensibly subdued by the arts of their vanquished rivals,⁸⁵

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 94, n. 80. ⁸⁰ nn. 74, 82. ⁸¹ p. 96, n. 83. ⁸² *NCG*, pp. 214–15.

⁸³ Womersley, 1994, III, pp. 97–105.

⁸⁴ Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 95–6. Do Gibbon's capitals gesture towards unitarianism?

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

as the Romans had been by those of the Greeks; but pagan or Christian, Rome preferred superstition to philosophy.

There has occurred a drastic change in the social and spiritual character of Christianity; but nothing more will be said of it while Gibbon recounts the disintegration of empire in the West, a process in which it plays no part.

Part VI

The Barbarisation of the West

17 The Gothic phase: the sack of Rome and the loss of the transalpine west

(I)

The next set of chapters to be considered – 29 through 36 – bring Gibbon to the climax, which might have been the conclusion, of the history he set out to write. That is, they relate the extinction of direct imperial authority over the provinces of the western empire, and look ahead to a new ruling culture, as much barbarian as Roman and to become as much Christian as either. This is what most historians and their readers meant, and in many cases still mean, by ‘the decline and fall of the Roman empire’, and Gibbon had already made it plain that he did not yet know if he would continue, or if he had a readership who wished him to continue, to the end of the eastern empire a thousand years after the point he now reached. In the event he did, and his history continued to be read; but the later volumes of the *Decline and Fall* offer new problems in the history of historiography, with which it is not the intention of this series to deal. The eastern empire had played a role in the collapse of the western, and Gibbon intended to narrate this; but it is clear from the chapters to be considered that he already found narrating an eastern history puzzling and even baffling, and we need to know why it presented him with such a problem.

The eight chapters now before us carry the history to the point where there is no longer a role for a western Augustus, as emperors had been termed, nor any candidate for the role. Instead, there are a number of kingdoms, as they are imprecisely termed, set up by barbarian warlords claiming in various degrees – in some cases none – to be Roman provincial governors legitimised by the far-off emperor in Constantinople. The world is still Roman as well as barbarian, and in the last chapters of Volume III we find Gibbon considering how this can be so (with the probable exception of Britain). The narrative of how western history reached this condition is neither simple nor single, and in the first three (29–31) of the eight chapters to be considered we find Gibbon relating a tangle of at least three narratives, culminating shortly after Alaric’s sack of

Rome in the year 410. These are, first, the story of how the Gothic *foederati* recognised by Theodosius in the east set out to seek power in the western empire, following a path which led them first to Rome and then by a circuitous route to Gaul and Spain; second, that of how barbarian forces other than Gothic broke through the former frontier on the Rhine and came to compete for control of the transalpine provinces of the empire, severing Britain altogether from Roman control in the process; third – a minor theme to become major in later chapters – the history of affairs in Roman Africa, on which the city of Rome and the provinces of Italy were dependent for their grain supplies. These narratives are entangled yet non-identical, and historians ancient and modern have had to make decisions as to how to relate them; Gibbon's chapters continue to consist of a multiplicity of narratives. There is, in addition, a set of reasons why one at least of his narratives differs from others so profoundly as to constitute a phenomenon in the history of historiography.

There are two ways of approaching the history of the sack of Rome in 410; both have been followed by historians since a time close to the event itself, and so form part of the history of historiography. One is to consider it as an event in the history of power in a decaying military-political system; to consider Alaric's aims, moves and achievements in the politics of a divided empire, what the sack of Rome did for him and what impact it had on the structure within which others competed for power with him. Gibbon, Tillemont and Orosius¹ – to name in reverse historical order the three authors who have most to tell us – do this, and their writings are part of the history we study. The other is to consider the emotional impact of the event itself: the shock and symbolism of the apparent fall of a city which had ruled the known world and in whose name the world was still governed. A flood of rhetorical and other literary responses surged over the literate culture of late antiquity, and these were of necessity as much Christian as they were Roman. A prime necessity for the former was to insist that the fall of Rome – into which the sack of 410 was exaggerated – was not the consequence of the abandonment of the gods of the city, and was justified by the presence of the Christian God. Among the early effects of the disaster were the history written by Orosius and the philosophy of history – in itself something new – into which Augustine enlarged it, and both are events in the history of historiography; Augustine's tending to transcend the latter altogether. They have been considered in an earlier volume of this series;² in this volume we shall need to consider their presence in the early modern historians. Tillemont's position of

¹ Deferrari, 1964; not the translation employed in *FDF*. ² *FDF*, ch. 5.

course is Augustinian to the core; Gibbon's is not only humanist and Enlightened, but in respect of Augustine enigmatically evasive. Both present the calamity of 410 in the setting of the grand patterns of history human or divine, and at the same time in that of the history of power in a decaying empire and of how that empire came to decay. As a secular event, the sack of Rome is a turning point not in the fall of the western empire, but in the reconstruction of that process in the Christian and post-Christian imaginations. Gibbon leaves it behind to study the disintegration of empire in Gaul, Spain and Britain; the end of the succession of emperors will come later, for the most part in Italy, and there is a Byzantine interlude to be considered first. In all these histories, it is to be noted – even the last – ecclesiastical history plays no part that Gibbon thinks needs to be separately related.

(II)

His primary concern in these chapters is with the narrative of *l'histoire événementielle*, necessarily as it has already been related by late antique historians. For the period that concerns him, these are few, eccentric and unreliable. There has been and will be no successor to Ammianus Marcellinus; the Codex Theodosianus is still valuable as an archival source, but the emperors of the fifth century are not lawgivers and there is no narrative of legal history to be drawn from it; the ecclesiastical historians of the sixth century pursue the history of church rather than empire, and Orosius and Augustine are in a class of their own. Jordanes's history of the Goths is a questionable source for barbarian history, and we shall find Gibbon making an interesting turn to near-contemporary historians: the Abbé Dubos, the Comte du Buat, and the German councillor Mascov.³ There remains the poet Claudian, the panegyrist of Stilicho and Honorius; but poets are allowed even greater licence than rhetors and sophists, and the need to rely on Claudian is for Gibbon less a source of information than a phenomenon of a time of collapse. Paradoxically enough, the weakness of his sources obliges him to give priority to the reconstruction of narratives; but long-term patterns of development, like general causes, appear only as they assert themselves. The fall of the western empire is not an exercise in philosophical history, which is perhaps why Gibbon presents his *General Observations* only as an appendix to Volume III. Immediately, the history of these disastrous reigns presents him with a series of narratives, which seem to have occurred concurrently,

³ Below, pp. 396–98.

but which he relates successively, sometimes with little regard for chronology. He has said at an earlier point⁴ that it has been better to write in this way than to attempt an annalistic or regnal historiography, which could only have confused the reader; but they are still presented as narratives, and there are moments when Tillemont, who is presenting the annals of reigns, is able to connect them in ways we do not find in Gibbon.

This said, it must instantly be conceded that the history of the sons of Theodosius is prefaced by a grand historical generalisation which governs the whole future shape of the Decline and Fall. It is that their accession marks 'the final and permanent division of the Roman empire'.⁵ This occurs along lines which have since the times of Diocletian and Constantine been familiar and institutionalised: Honorius governing the transalpine third – Britain, Gaul and Spain – together with the central third – Illyricum, Italy and Africa – while Arcadius rules the no less familiar east, from Thrace, Macedonia and Greece through Asia, Syria and Egypt. This is not the first time Gibbon's readers have been told of this division, or reminded that 'the boundary in Europe', dividing Illyria between west and east, was not very different from 'the line which now separates the Germans and the Turks';⁶ the Habsburgs and the Ottomans, we might add, the Croats and the Serbs, the Catholics and the Orthodox, the Christians and the Muslims. To re-emphasise the separation from late antiquity into modernity, as Gibbon here does, is to tell us that something of profound importance happened in the years succeeding Theodosius's death in 395; but when we enquire what it was, we learn that the immediate and transitory jealousies between the courts of the puppet emperors Honorius and Arcadius produced consequences of which the failure of western empire is one aspect but not the whole.

At a time when the only hope of delaying the ruin of the Roman name depended on the firm union and reciprocal aid of all the nations to whom it had been gradually communicated, the subjects of Arcadius and Honorius were instructed, by their respective masters, to view each other in a foreign and even hostile light, to rejoice in their mutual calamities; and to embrace, as their faithful allies, the barbarians whom they excited to invade the territories of their countrymen. The natives of Italy affected to despise the servile and effeminate Greeks of Byzantium, who presumed to imitate the dress, and to usurp the dignity, of Roman senators; and the Greeks had not yet forgot the sentiments of hatred and contempt which their polished ancestors had so long entertained for the rude inhabitants of the West. The distinction of two governments, which soon produced the separation of two nations, will justify my design of suspending the series of the Byzantine history, to

⁴ Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 988–9. ⁵ *Ibid.*, II, p. 99. ⁶ p. 98. Cf. I, p. 51.

prosecute, without interruption, the disgraceful but memorable reign of Honorius.⁷

The word ‘nation’ has not been a usual one with Gibbon, and it might be worth speculating on its appearance here; are we witnessing the triumph of ‘nation-state history’? But the ‘suspension’ announced in the last sentence has other and perhaps fatal consequences for the *Decline and Fall*. Gibbon is about to relate two mighty events – the loss of the transalpine west, and the sack of Rome with its implications for Africa – in almost exclusively western terms; as the result of actions and decisions taken in the western empire only, while the east appears as denying itself any role in the history of the empire of which it is the richer and safer part. History, in short, becomes western, and the question will arise of whether Gibbon perceives ‘the Byzantine history’ as being a history at all; a problem of significance once he decides to pursue his narrative past the years 395–476.

The immediate key to that history, and the division of the empires, proves to be the eastern fear of an over-mighty subject in the west: Stilicho, married to the adopted daughter of the late emperor and father to two daughters who will be the successive wives of the probably impotent Honorius. Charged, he says, by the dying Theodosius with the protection of both heirs, he leads the army which has put down Arbogast and Eugenius towards Constantinople, where the wicked Rufinus is in control, but on being forbidden to approach the capital orders the return of its eastern component under one Gainas, a Goth but perhaps not one of the *foederati* of 378. He and his men lose no time in liquidating Rufinus and become the principal force garrisoning the city, a role of course productive of the usual palace politics. ‘The favourites of Arcadius’ – soon to include Gainas –

fomented a secret and irreconcilable war against a formidable hero, who aspired to govern and to defend the two empires of Rome and the two sons of Theodosius,⁸

and Stilicho in due course finds himself *persona non grata* at Constantinople, forbidden to approach it and declared a public enemy. There ensue in the narrative three wars of rebellion, which seem to have been concurrent, but which Gibbon’s decision to treat them in as many separate chapters renders hard to synchronise or connect. In Africa, the Moorish prince Gildo, brother of the Firmus overthrown by the elder Theodosius, has for years been ruling as a classically depicted tyrant and about this time offers his allegiance to the eastern court (though Gibbon’s

⁷ p. 112. ⁸ *Ibid.*

language seems less than specific about this). Apart from the insult to Stilicho, this is not to be borne; not only is Africa a key province of the western empire, but the populace of Rome itself and the wealth of its senators are dependent on the regular supply of grain from Africa. This now becomes, as it will remain for the rest of Volume III, a crucial element in the story being told. A third brother, Mascezel, is sent against Gildo with forces including Gauls lately in the service of Eugenius; the fact that his seven contingents total only five thousand men indicates the weakness of manpower in the last years (we are in 398) of the western empire.⁹ They sail from Pisa, calling at the island where Rutilius Numatianus will shortly describe (with the usual invective) a colony of monks,¹⁰ and have little difficulty in defeating Gildo (whose forces consist largely of the Saharan equivalent of Bedouin). Stilicho in Milan sees to it that Gildo's lieutenants are tried by the senate of Rome, now emerging into a kind of activity after a century in which it was 'venerable but useless'; and he is suspected of complicity in the mysterious death of the victorious Mascezel – as if it were felt that Africa and its grain were better in the hands of Roman governors than of native princes. Gibbon concludes chapter 29 with an account of Honorius's marriage to Stilicho's daughter, and the remark that he will have little to say of this emperor for the rest of his reign.¹¹

Chapter 30 seems to set us on the road to Rome, by introducing the figure of the renowned Alaric. His role in the sack of 410 – still fifteen years away – has placed him at the centre of so magnificently terrible a drama that it is difficult to avoid seeing every episode in his life as one of its scenic preliminaries. Gibbon is not averse to doing this on occasion, attributing to Alaric the secret ambition of reaching Rome and overthrowing its domination; but what he writes as rhetorician must be set against the narrative he relates as historian. His Alaric has

solicited the command of the imperial armies; and the Imperial court provoked him to demonstrate the folly of their refusal, and the importance of their loss,¹²

conduct typical of the ambitious barbarian entering a service that may prove unable to control or satisfy him. Constantinople is impregnable; Thrace and the Danube have been picked clean; and he looks around for richer blackmail and lands more worth looting. His demands can be satisfied however, by the grant of a command, and if he receives one it may suit him to discharge its duties.

⁹ p. 116. ¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ pp. 118–20; a statement more significant than literally true. Many actions performed in his name must be related as if performed by him.

¹² p. 122.

Shortly after hearing of the death of Theodosius, 'the Gothic nation was in arms'.¹³ The *foederati* went in search of better reward, and Gibbon thinks that new warbands crossed the Danube from 'Scythia'. Alaric's men march south through Greece, dramatically bypassing Thermopylae, Athens, Eleusis – where the mysteries are never performed again – and crossing the isthmus of Corinth into the Peloponnese.¹⁴ One may reasonably ask what they are trying to achieve, other than being bought off or left in possession; but the court of Arcadius reluctantly turns to Stilicho, whose army crosses from Italy and engages in a war of manoeuvre, in which Stilicho shepherds Alaric out of the Peloponnese and Alaric evades Stilicho by crossing the straits of Corinth into Epirus. One may again ask what has been going on; but it is less surprising to learn that Alaric has 'secretly negotiated with the ministers of Constantinople' and that Stilicho now retires

at the haughty mandate of his rivals, from the dominions of Arcadius; and he respected, in the enemy of Rome, the honourable character of the ally and servant of the emperor of the East.¹⁵

We have arrived at the relationship between the two warlords which will persist until Stilicho's death. Each is playing a double game, with the other but even more with the emperor from whom he is trying to exact greater power and authority. Each has a certain respect for the other, as playing a game both understand; and in the last analysis, each derives legitimacy from the empire whose ministers he so thoroughly despises. The next act in the drama displays the removal of the action from the eastern empire to the western.

Since Gibbon has chosen to relate narratives separately from their annalistic setting, he does not – differing here from Tillemont – show these campaigns, African, Greek and Illyrian, interacting with one another, or with the third civil war with which Arcadius's ministers have to deal. This is a triangular struggle between the Gothic generals – Gainas, Tribigild and Fravitta – who defend and control Constantinople itself, and ends only when Gainas is defeated in an attempt to cross the Hellespont, and eleven days later – an interval Gibbon suspiciously investigates – is known to have been slain in Scythia beyond the Danube by a Hunnic king named Uldin.¹⁶ The story suggests both that the Roman-Byzantine policy of subsidising frontier potentates was once more in shape, and that some consolidation of power was taking place in the lands occupied by Huns since 376. This seems to occur in 401; but Gibbon recounts it three chapters and many pages later than the crises

¹³ p. 121. ¹⁴ pp. 123–4. ¹⁵ p. 127. ¹⁶ Ch. 32; pp. 249–52.

of 399, and only after he has narrated the full story of the sack of Rome and the loss of the transalpine west. Although he here remarks that ‘the first events of the reign of Arcadius and Honorius are so intimately connected, that the rebellion of the Goths and the fall of Rufinus have already a place in the history of the West’,¹⁷ the war ending with the defeat of Gainas takes place in the history of the east, which is now that of a separate nation, neither affecting nor affected by the events constituting the Decline and Fall. So at least Gibbon has condemned himself to write.

Following immediately after the campaigns of Stilicho and Alaric in Epirus – concurrently with that of Mascezel in Africa – Gibbon tells us at some length¹⁸ about the oration *De Regno* pronounced before Arcadius about this time by the philosopher and later bishop Synesius of Cyrene, who has appeared earlier as excommunicating a tyrannous governor.¹⁹ In *De Regno*, he attacks the purchase by ‘citizens and subjects’ of exemption from military service and their replacement by barbarian mercenaries, and

exhorts the emperor to revive the courage of his subjects by the example of manly virtue; to banish luxury from the court and from the camp; to substitute . . . an army of men interested in the defence of their laws and of their property . . . and to arm, for the protection of agriculture, the hands of the laborious husbandman.²⁰

And so forth. Gibbon knows perfectly well, as Synesius probably did himself, that this is rhetorical declamation in an imaginary world. Rome is no longer a polity, an economy, or a culture where self-reliant citizens, craftsmen and husbandmen can be found to bear arms in their own defence. That, however, is the point. Decline and Fall is taking place because the empire, like the republic, has ceased to be a civilisation capable of defending itself, and there is a history as far back as Tiberius Gracchus of how this came to be the case; a history Gibbon has been occasionally writing and constantly implying. We have returned to the humanist macronarrative, as old as Bruni and Machiavelli, of the *grandeur et decadence des Romains*. In *l’histoire événementielle*, to which Gibbon instantly returns, Synesius’s oration coincides with an imperial edict ‘which declared the promotion of Alaric to the rank of master-general of the Eastern Illyricum’.²¹ That might seem the end of the story, as far as the empire of Arcadius is concerned; but Gibbon proceeds, without interruption and apparently without explanation, to the two steps which transform Alaric into the Gothic invader, and the actor in the Italian politics, of the empire of Honorius, and will make him a none too

¹⁷ p. 239. ¹⁸ Ch. 30; pp. 127–28. ¹⁹ Above, p. 77.

²⁰ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 127. ²¹ p. 128.

successful figure in a history greater than he understands or Gibbon is prepared to accord to Byzantium.

(III)

Alaric's next move is to make him a doubly ambiguous figure: Roman or Gothic, eastern or western? Gibbon's language presents this problematic, and with it two assumptions that rhetoric obliged the historian to make.

The birth of Alaric, the glory of his past exploits, and the confidence in his future designs, insensibly unified the body of the nation under his victorious standards; and with the unanimous consent of the barbarian chieftains, the master general of Illyricum was elevated, according to ancient custom, on a shield, and solemnly proclaimed king of the Visigoths. Armed with this double power, seated on the verge of the two empires, he alternately sold his deceitful promises to the courts of Arcadius and Honorius, till he declared and executed his resolution of invading the dominions of the West.²²

Gibbon here supposes, what on other occasions he calls in question, that the Goths, or at any rate the Visigoths, formed a 'nation' possessed of a body, capable of choosing itself a king by ancient custom. But once we look beyond the Tervingi and Greuthungi recognised as *foederati* by Theodosius, 'the Goths' become a diversity of groups in different regions, pursuing different ambitions;²³ and Gibbon does not really know what the authority of a 'king' among culturally alien barbarians amounted to. It would be fair to ask whether Alaric's *mana* makes him the lawgiver and creator of a nation, or the paramount head of a confederacy of warrior clans, like Hermanric before the Huns came; and the reader will want to know whether 'the Goths' act as a 'nation' in Gibbon's future narrative. He further supposes that Alaric 'secretly aspired to plant the Gothic standard on the walls of Rome, and to enrich his army with the accumulated spoils of three hundred triumphs'.²⁴ This is plainly a rhetorical, even a poetical, figure, derived from the huge symbolic effect of the sack of Rome several years later, and in a footnote to the words just quoted²⁵ Gibbon says as much; Claudian, not Alaric, is its author. Gibbon is writing history on two levels, of which he can dispense with neither. The *histoire événementielle* he is obliged to recount will constantly show Alaric acting with apparent moderation and responsibility, but also with

²² pp. 128–9.

²³ Heather, 2005 repeatedly designates the forces led by Alaric and his successors as 'the Gothic supergroup'.

²⁴ p. 129. N. 23 quotes Jordanes/Jornandes as saying that Alaric aspired *quaerere regna*; the plural should be noted.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, n. 25.

ambiguity and uncertainty. The king of the Goths may march on Rome; the master-general of Illyricum cannot.

What now happens, cursorily related in chapter 30, is that Alaric leaves Epirus – if that is where his army was quartered; Gibbon thinks it may have been Thessalonica – and marches north, ‘through the warlike and hostile country of Pannonia, as far as the foot of the Julian Alps’, where he is in a position to invade Italy. To arrive here must involve the siege of Aquileia and the conquest of several provinces, actions which

appear to have employed a considerable time. Unless his operations were extremely cautious and slow, the length of the interval would suggest a probable suspicion that the Goth retreated towards the banks of the Danube and reinforced his army with fresh swarms of barbarians, before he again attempted to penetrate into the heart of Italy. Since the public and important events escape the diligence of the historian,²⁶

Gibbon is obliged to ‘amuse himself’ with two picturesque stories, and does not tell us what, other than vaulting ambition, induced Alaric to leave his guaranteed warlordship in lower Illyricum and set himself up on the Danubian borderlands of Italy far to the north. Here he finds himself in contact with the *barbaricum* beyond what *limites* are left, but also ‘on the verge of the two empires’,²⁷ whose interaction, and the policies of Stilicho, will govern his acts for the rest of his life. The rhetoric of Decline and Fall will not impede Gibbon from attempting to narrate this history; but it is here that he emphasises that in order to meet Alaric, Stilicho denuded the Rhineland and Britain of their legions.

The prudence and vigour of Stilicho were conspicuous on this occasion, which revealed, at the same time, the weakness of the falling empire. The legions of Rome, which had long since languished in the gradual decay of discipline and courage, were exterminated by the Gothic and civil wars; and it was found impossible, without exhausting and exposing the provinces, to assemble an army for the defence of Italy.²⁸

Had this weakness existed in the days of Theodosius, and does Gibbon’s account of the military causes of Decline and Fall go deeper than this?

Alaric invades Italy and threatens Rome during 402–3 – with what motives, between the extremes of mere plunder and the reversal of empires, is not clear – but is confronted by Stilicho, who defeats him in two set battles and offers him honourable retreat beyond the Alps. This he accepts, and where he spends the next two years is uncertain; perhaps Noricum, perhaps Epirus. He has clearly become an actor in a story set by Stilicho, and we are obliged to reassess both players. Stilicho’s critics ask

²⁶ pp. 129–30. ²⁷ p. 129. ²⁸ p. 132.

why he allows Alaric to escape each time he defeats him; is he reserving him for a role in the recovery of Illyricum by the western empire in some game he is playing with the eastern? And is Alaric a Gothic conqueror, an invading barbarian, or a provincial warlord on the marchlands between the empires, playing a game not unlike Stilicho's? Tillemont, as Gibbon knows, has written his own history of these years, and uses the marginal heading 'Quel estoit Alaric'. His text reads:

Nous ne voyons point si ce fut en qualité de General de l'Illyrie et au nom d'Arcade qu'il fit sa premiere descente en Italie; car jamais Arcade n'a esté bien d'accord avec Honoré: ou si ce fut comme ennemi commun des Romains, et par une suite des mouvemens de Tribigilde et de Gainas, tous deux Gots comme luy, qui se revoltent contre Arcade, l'un en l'an 399, l'autre en l'an 400. Il y a neanmoins peu d'apparence qu'Arcade embarrassé par ces deux revoltes, ait voulu faire alors la guerre à son frere. Et selon Jornande les Gots n'avoient fait Alaric leur Roy que pour faire la guerre à Arcade et à Honoré, les méprisants l'un et l'autre, et mecontens de n'en recevoir pas tous les presens ordinaires, ou autant que leur avarice en demandoit.²⁹

[We do not know whether it was in his character of master general of Illyria and in the name of Arcadius, that he made his first descent into Italy, Arcadius having never been on good terms with Honorius; or whether it was as an enemy to all Romans and in consequence of the actions of Tribigild and Gainas, both Goths like him, who rebelled against Arcadius in 399 and 400 respectively. There is however little likelihood that Arcadius, threatened by these two rebellions, would have wanted to make war upon his brother. And according to Jornandes the Goths had made Alaric their king merely to make war on Arcadius and Honorius together, holding both in contempt, and dissatisfied because they had not received the usual gifts, at least on the scale their greed demanded.]

Tillemont was writing regnal and annalistic history, and had sometimes made connections Gibbon left unmentioned; but he and Gibbon agreed that Stilicho was the key player whatever his intentions. Alaric does not return to the chessboard until 405, by which time something has happened which dwarfs the strategies and significance of all parties: nothing other than a further *Volkerwanderung*, on a scale greater than that of 375. Groups of peoples mainly Germanic assail the Alpine and Rhenish frontiers of the western empire, seemingly on a scale greater than any previously known. They are not petitioning for *receptio* by means of plunder and blackmail, but demanding it in arms in what looks like invasion; or this may be how they appear in the perceptions of an empire far less able to deal with them than in times relatively recent. We seem to be looking at the collapse of a system capable of *receptio*, and therefore of

²⁹ Tillemont, *Empereurs*, v, p. 227.

the government of provinces; Gibbon speaks of an actual 'fall' of empire in the provinces worst affected, and Stilicho and Alaric have to conduct their competition on the frontier between east and west in the context thus forced upon them.

These invaders consist not only of warriors seeking to extort *receptio* by means of plunder and blackmail, but of populations on the move with women and children. It is therefore necessary to explain who they were, where they came from, and what has set them in motion; and Gibbon reverts without a pause to the pattern of explanation he earlier³⁰ derived from Joseph de Guignes and the Chinese historians. The Sienpi, whose confederation expelled the Huns toward the west, become the Topa, who turn east and establish a dynasty in northern China; but there is a counter-movement of their slaves and subjects, who under the name spelt 'Geougen' – the 'Jurchen' of more modern historians – become a conquering horde and expel the Huns from the lands north of the Caspian Sea. Here is the thrust which sets in motion a chain reaction felt in far-off western Europe.

Gibbon concedes, as he has before, that the distances are too great, the time-lapse too long, and the written sources too non-existent, to permit even de Guignes to write the history of this reaction shock by shock. Yet he continues to insist upon it, employing moods and tenses which tell us he is employing conjectural history in the absence of written narratives. The Huns expelled from the Caspian find that

the countries towards the Euxine were already occupied by their kindred tribes; and their hasty flight . . . *would* more naturally be directed towards the rich and level plains through which the Vistula gently flows into the Baltic Sea. The North *must* again have been alarmed and agitated by the invasion of the Huns; and the nations who retreated before them *must have* pressed with incumbent weight on the confines of Germany. The inhabitants of those regions which the ancients have assigned to the Suevi, the Vandals, and the Burgundians, *might* embrace the resolution of abandoning to the fugitives of Sarmatia their woods and morasses, or at least of discharging their superfluous numbers on the provinces of the Roman empire.³¹

In recounting this geohistory Gibbon is navigating between two accounts of the invasion of Roman Europe by 'barbarian' and 'Germanic' peoples: the 'Asian', which he prefers, following de Guignes, and the 'Germanic', which presented a recurrent flood of peoples resembling the Germans described by Tacitus, taking shape north of the Baltic in Scandinavia and regularly embarking on a southward road of conquest and settlement. The latter was to assume great and romantic importance in the nationalist

³⁰ Above, p. 261. ³¹ Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 142–3. Emphasis JGAP's.

historiography of the nineteenth century, and controversy about it is not yet at an end;³² but we should be cautious before attributing too much of this to Gibbon and the *Decline and Fall*. In his earlier studies he had become, and remained, interested in a medieval and humanist version of the question: the literature concerning Odin (otherwise Wotan or Fo) who might appear an eastern or Asian lawgiver who had led his peoples from south-east to north-west where they became the scourges of Rome;³³ and though there is no sign of him in chapter 30, Gibbon goes on from the words last quoted:

About four years after the victorious Toulun had assumed the title of Khan of the Geougen, another barbarian, the haughty Rhadogast, or Radagaisus, marched from the northern extremities of Germany almost to the gates of Rome, and left the remains of his army to achieve the destruction of the West. The Vandals, the Suevi, and the Burgundians, formed the strength of this mighty host; but the Alani, who had found an hospitable reception in their new seats,³⁴ added their active cavalry to the heavy infantry of the Germans; and the Gothic adventurers crowded so eagerly to the standard of Radagaisus, that, by some historians, he has been styled the King of the Goths ... This formidable emigration issued from the same coast of the Baltic which had poured forth the myriads of the Cimbri and Teutones to assault Rome and Italy in the vigour of the republic. After the departure of these barbarians, their native country ...³⁵ remained, during some ages, a vast and dreary solitude; till the human species was renewed by the powers of generation, and the vacancy was filled by the influx of new inhabitants. The nations who now usurp an extent of land which they are unable to cultivate would soon be assisted by the industrious poverty of their neighbours; if the government of Europe did not protect the claims of dominion and property.³⁶

Leaving aside this rather curious conclusion – it is hard to find instances of European protection of hunters and shepherds against agricultural colonisation – this passage carries two implications. The first is that Gibbon is seeking to reconcile the ‘Asian’ and ‘Germanic’ theses, suggesting both that pressures originating on the Eurasian steppe led to a concentration of fugitive and land-hungry peoples as far north as the Baltic, and that the Baltic lands were fertile enough to deserve the title of *vagina* or *officina gentium*. It is curious that he does not mention the possibility that Huns were moving west of the Euxine lands they had occupied in their first invasions and laying the foundations of Attila’s regime later in

³² Goffart, 2006, *passim*; esp. pp. 15–16. ³³ *EEG*, p. 281; *BSE*, pp. 126–7, 146–9.

³⁴ For Gibbon’s earlier mention of them, see Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 1042–3.

³⁵ The words omitted cite evidence from Tacitus’s account of the Germans.

³⁶ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 143.

the century. This of itself might have been enough to set the peoples in motion. The second is an emerging insistence that Radagaisus was the chief of a double emigration, and that the army which, as Gibbon is about to tell us, he led to destruction at Florence was also the army which broke through the Roman frontiers on the lower Rhine. This error, on which Gibbon more than once insists,³⁷ may have occurred because he failed to notice that Zosimus had confused his sources,³⁸ but does not prevent him from relating the two invasions as separate if connected narratives; and before he arrives at either, there is an important change in the structure of western government that seems to have preceded them. Honorius's courtiers – who do not include Stilicho – persuade him to move his residence from Milan, held to be dangerously exposed, to Ravenna on the Adriatic coast.³⁹ This means the abandonment of Diocletian's line of military capitals – Trier, Milan, Sirmium and Nicomedia – designed to protect the frontiers and satisfy the Augusti; and Ravenna, situated on offshore islands surrounded by lagoons, is a lesser Constantinople or Venice. Impregnable to attack by land, it can maintain no army of its own and becomes a place of refuge for an isolated emperor surrounded by his domestics. A step towards the possible Byzantinisation of the western empire, it will remain for four centuries – whatever becomes of Rome – the provincial capital of an empire that no longer exists; but the fates of Stilicho and even Alaric are effects of the power it can wield even in its impregnable impotence.

The correspondence of nations was in that age so imperfect and precarious, that the revolutions of the North might escape the knowledge of the court of Ravenna, till the dark cloud, which was collected along the coast of the Baltic, burst in thunder upon the banks of the Upper Danube.⁴⁰

Gibbon, who knew and thought about the Roman system of military roads, does not seem to have been asking himself how fast an army either Roman or barbarian could move through country in this case not Roman. However, we are now in the year 405, when Radagaisus, at the head of a mighty host,

passed without resistance the Alps, the Po, and the Apennine; leaving on one hand the inaccessible palace of Honorius securely buried among the marshes of Ravenna, and, on the other, the camp of Stilicho, who had fixed his headquarters at Ticinum, or Pavia, but who seems to have avoided a decisive battle till he had assembled his distant forces.⁴¹

³⁷ pp. 143, 148. Here (n. 86) Gibbon cites du Buat's *Histoire Ancienne des Peuples de l'Europe*, 'an elaborate work, which I had not the advantage of perusing till the year 1777'.

³⁸ Heather, 2005, p. 194. ³⁹ Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 139–44. ⁴⁰ pp. 143–4.

⁴¹ p. 144.

Radagaisus makes for Florence, near enough to Rome to cause terror there; the senate and people are supposed dismally comparing the danger escaped in 402 with that now before them.

Alaric was a Christian and a soldier, the leader of a disciplined army; who understood the laws of war, who respected the sanctity of treaties, and who had familiarly conversed with the subjects of the empire in the same camps and the same churches. The savage Radagaisus –

‘savage’ here is more a noun than an adjective –

was a stranger to the manners, the religion, and even the language of the civilised nations of the south.⁴²

Here it is worth comparing the language of Orosius.

One of these kings was a Christian and more like a Roman, and, as the fact has shown, a man, through fear of God, restrained in slaughter; the other, a pagan, barbarian, and truly a Scythian, who loved not glory or booty so much as in his insatiable cruelty he loved slaughter for its own sake.⁴³

God, he continues, permitted the Christian to triumph, to the end that the pagans should be destroyed by his hands, which were later the instrument of the punishment of the Romans; the victory of Radagaisus would have been neither righteous nor edifying. Gibbon’s contrast has another purpose. Alaric, somewhere in Illyria, plays no part in this campaign, and appears in its history only in consequence of the unending fascination exercised by a conqueror of Rome who can equally be represented as a loyal Roman and a barbarian conqueror. Stilicho meanwhile

painfully collected from the subjects of a great empire an army of thirty or forty thousand men, which, in the days of Scipio or Camillus, would have been instantly furnished by the free citizens of the territory of Rome.⁴⁴

Stripping the transalpine provinces of their defences, he assembles thirty legions (we know that these would have been of reduced size), reinforced by ‘a large body of barbarian auxiliaries’, Alans, Huns and Goths; marches on Florence and somehow detaches Radagaisus’s hordes from their siege, after which they take refuge on the hill of Fiesole and permit themselves to be surrounded by earthworks, starved into surrender and sold as slaves. Gibbon expresses confidence that he can extract a credible story from the accounts given by Orosius and Augustine.⁴⁵ He is even more confident that Radagaisus had led into Italy the united host of Germans assembled on the coasts of the Baltic, that two-thirds of these remained at large after

⁴² p. 145. ⁴³ Deferrari, 1964, p. 150. ⁴⁴ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 144.

⁴⁵ p. 146, n. 77. Cf. p. 147, n. 83, on the absence of any account by Claudian.

the surrender at Fiesole, and that it was this force who crossed the Rhine into Gaul on the last day of the year in which Radagaisus had perished in August.⁴⁶ There were routes from Italy into Gaul; but Gibbon is well aware that the invasion of 31 December went by way of Mainz, Worms, Speier and Strasbourg, and that his 'Gaul' was our (and his) lower Germany. How the hosts of the Baltic made their way from the Arno to the middle Rhine we are not told.

The moment is apocalyptic.

This memorable passage of the Suevi, the Vandals, the Alani, and the Burgundians, who never afterwards retreated, may be considered as the fall of the Roman empire in the countries beyond the Alps; and the barriers, which had so long separated the savage and the civilised nations of the earth, were from that fatal moment levelled with the ground.⁴⁷

Gibbon had found nothing so momentous to say of the disaster of Adrianople, but we know he did not really think that all barbarians were savages, and rhetoric is at work in this sentence. The immediate cause of the collapse on the Rhine is understood to have been Stilicho's withdrawal of the legions of Gaul to pursue Radagaisus, and the pagan Zosimus and the Christian Orosius agreed in regarding him as the betrayer of the empire;⁴⁸ but longer-term courses are needed to explain why he had no reserves in Gaul and made no attempt to recover it. The allied Franks are left to face the Vandals and Alani, and the various tribes, warbands or nations spread out across an apparently open landscape, looting cities as well as countryside, and rapidly reaching the Pyrenees and crossing into Spain. Gibbon begins to contemplate a post-Roman history of the trans-alpine west, in which barbarians establish new patterns of exploitation and settlement.

But it is only ten years since the Frigidus, when the armies of the two empires were able to face each other in pitched battle, and only forty since Valentinian I and the elder Theodosius were able to recover Germany, Britain and Africa from a succession of barbarian invaders. Something is needed to explain this rapid decay of military strength; some set of long-term causes which have reached a tipping-point; but the accounts of legionary decadence which Gibbon has drawn from Zosimus and Vegetius are far too general to permit him to focus on any moment or period. We look for some account of how over-taxation has exhausted property and treasury; but all we receive in chapter 30 is a scornful account of how the Pelagian controversy, in which Orosius and Augustine were engaged in these years, led to debate about predestination

⁴⁶ p. 148. ⁴⁷ p. 149. ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, n. 88.

and the wisdom of Providence, 'rashly weighed in the imperfect and fallacious balance of reason'. Gibbon begins to sound like Synesius in the *De Regno*.

These idle disputants overlooked the invariable laws of nature, which have connected peace with innocence, plenty with industry, and safety with valour. The timid and selfish policy of the court of Ravenna might recall the Palatine legions for the protection of Italy; the remains of the stationary troops might be unequal to the arduous task; and the barbarian auxiliaries might prefer the unbounded licence of spoil to the benefits of a moderate and regular stipend. But the provinces of Gaul were filled with a numerous race of hardy and robust youth –

of whom we have not heard anything while Gibbon has been describing the decadence of the provincials –

who, in the defence of their houses, their families, and their altars –

pagan or Christian?

if they had dared to die, would have deserved to vanquish. The knowledge of their native country would have enabled them to oppose continual and insuperable obstacles to the progress of an invader; and the deficiency of the barbarians in arms as well as in discipline removed the only pretense which excuses the submission of a populous country to the inferior numbers of a veteran army . . . in less than two years the divided troops of the savages of the Baltic, whose numbers, were they fairly stated, would appear contemptible, advanced without a combat to the foot of the Pyrenean mountains.⁴⁹

Gibbon goes on to examine the military politics of an empire devoid of ancient virtue, Caesarean efficiency, or modern patriotism; but just how this vacuum has been created he can explain better than he can narrate.

(IV)

The events of peace and war have undoubtedly been diminished by the narrow and imperfect view of the historians of the times, who were equally ignorant of the causes and of the effects of the most important revolutions. But the total decay of the national strength had annihilated even the last resource of a despotic government; and the revenue of exhausted provinces could no longer purchase the military service of a discontented and pusillanimous people.⁵⁰

Not unlike Voltaire and Emilie du Chatelet at the outset of the *Essai sur les Moeurs*,⁵¹ Gibbon is faced with a period when the actions of men have become so puny that they can only find historians as insignificant as themselves; we have the history of the pygmies, but not of the fierce

⁴⁹ p. 151. ⁵⁰ pp. 154–5. ⁵¹ *NCG*, pp. 102–4.

(and illiterate) giants. He sets out to relate the military politics of an empire without effective power, and its first actor is a certain Constantine,⁵² allegedly but not certainly a private soldier, raised by a series of coups to command what armies are left in Britain. Here the legions are inclined by experience to consider themselves the ultimate sideshow, but no sooner has this Constantine secured his position in the island than he sets out to restore the far western empire, and in a short time finds himself a second Maximus, exercising with the title of Augustus what is left of authority in Britain, Gaul and Spain. Since this is acquired by the voluntary submission of scattered city garrisons and barbarian bands, the historians, including Gibbon, feel safe in denying Constantine any talent of his own; but in quite a serious campaign – so reads the text – he sees off the army of Sarus the Goth, a formidable character sent against him by the emperor Honorius. By merely continuing to exist, as a rival Augustus recognised over a wide area, he determines the politics of western empire, in their shattered condition following the collapse of the Rhine frontier. It may be asked whether Gibbon and his authorities have done him justice.⁵³

The narrative of a higher politics of empire is resumed with the return to history of Alaric, of whom nothing has been heard for some time, as the lieutenant or collaborator of Stilicho. The policies of the latter remain enigmatic, but it is possible to reflect that tripartite division of the empire has been known before, and that Constantine might remain Augustus beyond the Alps while Stilicho laboured to restore the power of the central provinces, Italy, Africa and Illyricum. Here the role of Alaric becomes crucial; he appears secure in his Illyrian command, but before the defeat of Radagaisus re-enters the politics of the western empire, moving his army to modern Ljubljana⁵⁴ and sending Honorius a demand for subsidies and the suggestion that his Goths may be granted a province of their own. In this Stilicho supports him, and when Ravenna proves recalcitrant activates a new set of reluctant actors by proposing a choice between peace or war with Alaric to the immensely wealthy but deeply unmilitary senators of Rome. They grant Alaric's demands, voiced by Stilicho; but has the latter set out on a policy of saving Ravenna from itself by opposing its power? As Gibbon has remarked, the

⁵² Sometimes termed Constantine III, in succession to the great Constantine and his short-lived son; but as he did not achieve lasting recognition, 'Constantine of Britain' might have been better. Gibbon knows him by no title but his name.

⁵³ Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 152–3.

⁵⁴ 'Aemona on the confines of Italy' (p. 156); identified (vol. I, p. 434, n. 87) as 'Laybach', a spelling of the German name for Ljubljana.

necessity of finding some artificial support for a government which, from a principle not of moderation, but of weakness, was reduced to negotiate with its own subjects, had insensibly revived the authority of the Roman senate;

and this is why the

political and secret transactions of two statesmen who laboured to deceive each other and the world must forever have been concealed in the impenetrable darkness of the cabinet, if the debates of a popular assembly –

when was the senate last called that? –

had not thrown some rays of light on the correspondence of Alaric and Stilicho.⁵⁵

The word is not likely to have meant an exchange of letters. Alaric's demands were more limited than Stilicho's, being confined to money, lands and a provincial command, but both men were appealing to Rome against Ravenna, and the fall of Stilicho which soon followed set west Roman politics on a road which would lead to the sack of 410, two years later.

The rise of Constantine and the loss of control in Gaul distract the power-seekers from the complex game Stilicho and Alaric have been playing on the junction between west and east. Gibbon suggests a widening breach between Roman and barbaric elements in the army; but it is news of the death of Arcadius in distant Constantinople which precipitates Honorius's increasing reliance on the palace politicians in Ravenna. They induce him to situate himself in Pavia, where armies are supposedly assembling for an expedition to Gaul; both here and in Bologna, where Stilicho has his base, Sarus the Goth executes a military coup and a massacre of his supporters. Instead of resorting to civil war, Stilicho suicidally takes refuge in Ravenna, where he is arrested and executed by a certain Heraclian, of whom more will be heard. His family are put to death, and the triumphant faction constructs a narrative in which he appears as betrayer of the West and plotter of a pagan restoration. Elements of this are found in both the Christian Orosius and the pagan Zosimus; Gibbon seeks to eliminate them, in favour of a portrayal of Stilicho as the empire's last reliable statesman.⁵⁶ He cautiously prefers the account given by Claudian, and concludes chapter 30 with a critical encomium on the latter as perhaps the last of the Roman poets, recognised as such by the critics of the Renaissance.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ p. 156, for both passages. ⁵⁶ A summary of the complex narrative on pp. 157–62.
⁵⁷ pp. 162–4.

(V)

The series of events, from the death of Stilicho to the arrival of Alaric before Rome, can only be found in Zosimus, l.v., [c. 35–37].⁵⁸

The sack of 410, occurring after the point at which Zosimus's narrative ceases, plays as we already know a double role in the history of historiography. In civil history, or *histoire événementielle*, it is an episode in the disintegration of Roman empire in the west; but there is a macrohistory or even a metahistory, in which what matters is less how this disaster came about than the historic or even cosmic significance, to contemporaries and to posterity, of its having happened at all. We may distinguish these two under the names of narrative and drama. Gibbon in chapter 31 pursues both, giving attention to the historians who have written before him; but we shall find that he pursues each in his own way. In the former historiography, he can be read as suggesting that Alaric's career in Italy was less damaging to the structure of empire than the loss of Gaul and Spain consequent on the collapse of the Rhine frontier, and that the strategic meaning of the Gothic sack of Rome will not fully emerge until the Vandal kingdom takes control of Africa. In the metanarrative of the event's significance, he is offered a choice which he does not take. He presents it in two ways: as a climax in the long story of the decline of ancient virtue, and as another in the history of the decline of the city, which he had intended before it became a history of the decline of the empire. Since he is sceptical of the reality of sacred history, he does not follow Orosius in seeing the sack as a judgement of God, or Augustine in suggesting that the meaning of God's actions is not to be found in history whether sacred or secular; and it is a consequence that he does not see Augustine as himself a historical phenomenon of significance. For all these reasons, chapter 31 of the *Decline and Fall* is a complex and perhaps a plural phenomenon in the history of historiography.

Reverting to *histoire événementielle*, we have so far met with Alaric as Roman-Gothic warlord alternating between both empires, and moving between Epirus and Noricum-Pannonia, provinces lying between the Alpine passes into Italy and the Goth-controlled lands on the upper Danube. He plays his own cards in a complex game dominated by the politics of Stilicho, who expels him from Italy on his first appearance there, but extorts a subsidy for him from the Roman senate on his second. Stilicho's death leaves him in command of the strongest army in north-east Italy, the problem of Constantine in Gaul having distracted his competitors; he makes no attempt to return to Illyricum, but moves

⁵⁸ p. 165, n.1 (Gibbon gives only page references to these chapters).

between Ravenna and Rome, seeking support and threatening plunder in his dealings with each; it is as if his power had been diminished, like (shall we add?) that of all other players, by the crisis in Gaul. Gibbon, however, thinks him the better negotiator;⁵⁹ it is as if Rome was always his objective. Ravenna, which has no army, relies on its impregnability in refusing his demands and he pitches his camp 'under the walls of Rome',⁶⁰ having moved south from the Alps to make his first appearance there.

In Gibbon's narrative, Alaric is not a mercenary on the rampage, but takes on the stature of a barbarian conqueror in a drama apparently supernatural and even sacred. When a holy hermit remonstrates with him as a fellow Christian,

the saint himself was confounded by the solemn asseveration of Alaric that he felt a secret and praeternatural impulse, which directed, and even compelled his march to the gates of Rome. He felt that his genius and his fortune were equal to the most arduous enterprises; and the enthusiasm which he communicated to the Goths insensibly removed the popular and almost superstitious reverence of the nations for the majesty of the Roman name.⁶¹

We are on the hinge between pagan and Christian sacred history. Genius and fortune are enough to generate enthusiasm in a pagan, and perhaps for Zosimus the gods are angry with Rome for forsaking their worship. But for Orosius, Augustine and in modern times Tillemont, all of whom recount his history, Alaric is without knowing it God's instrument for punishing Rome, first for practising pagan virtue – which for Augustine is no more than the *libido dominandi*, and for Tillemont may be cause for the damnation of those who do not recognise God as its source and grace as its mediator – and then for abandoning it. The Rome under whose walls Alaric makes his camp is deeply corrupt, due to Gibbon's 'secret poison', and pagans and Christians can agree on the portrayal, and some of the causes, of this corruption. Gibbon settles down to portray it.

He does so on a scale unknown elsewhere in the *Decline and Fall*. Twenty pages of the edition now standard⁶² go by in chapter 31 before the narrative of Alaric's actions is resumed, and of these, six⁶³ are enclosed between quotation marks, indicating that they contain a direct if improved translation of two long passages, here run together, taken from the fourteenth and twenty-eighth books of Ammianus Marcellinus,⁶⁴ the master

⁵⁹ p. 166–7. ⁶⁰ p. 168. ⁶¹ p. 167. ⁶² Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 168–88.

⁶³ pp. 175–81.

⁶⁴ p. 175, n. 34, for Gibbon's account of how his quotation has been constructed and polished. He also (p. 172, n. 26) mentions a 'fragment' of the historian 'Olympiodorus', giving 'a curious account of Rome in the age of Honorius'. This history, surviving only in a Byzantine summary, had been a source for both Zosimus and Orosius. Olympiodorus might have been another Ammianus had Gibbon possessed his work in full.

historian to whom Gibbon bade farewell at the end of Volume II. These pages present a vivid description, at the same time a satire, portraying the *dolce vita* of the senatorial aristocracy of Rome, now deprived of any political or military role – which, however, Alaric and Honorius are about to force upon them once more – and devoted to conspicuous consumption and the entertainment rather than upkeep of hordes of needy clients. Their vast wealth consists of estates scattered throughout the empire, of which it will take more than a mere looting of Rome to deprive them; and Gibbon observes that these are worked either by slaves or by ‘hereditary tenant[s], attached to the soil and interested in the produce’,⁶⁵ a somewhat rosy description of the colonate bordering on serfdom depicted elsewhere. The point of Gibbon’s pages is that the Roman aristocracy and proletariat are in every way useless; their economy is based not on industry, but on debt and competitive display, and if those who were once politicians are now useless as ruling citizens, those who were once plebeians are now useless as citizen soldiers. Gibbon’s twenty pages open by contrasting the response to Alaric with that of former times to Hannibal. In the heroic age of the republic, armies sprang out of the soil to replace those lost in battle, and were supplied by a citizen body of two hundred and fifty thousand, compared with the twelve hundred thousand inhabiting the corn-fed megalopolis of the fifth century.⁶⁶ When the senators threaten Alaric with the resistance of the people, the barbarian roars with laughter and offers to spare their lives if they will surrender;⁶⁷ which, after negotiation, is what they do. Alaric for once is shown behaving like a Goth; but behind the episode lies the familiar history of the decline, since times before the Gracchi, of an arms-bearing yeomanry, and the transformation of the city from the sacred capital of an agrarian republic into the great wen of an empire with whose government and defence it has had nothing to do for two centuries, but in which the loss of Gaul has now made it an unwilling and impotent actor. The Goth is more Roman than the Romans have become; but there remains the circumstance – which perhaps we need the history of religion and ‘the human mind’ to explain – that the city retains the symbolic sacrality of its republican and imperial past. This huge weight of significance does not render the Romans capable of defending their city; but it does explain the reaction of saints and historians, from Augustine to Gibbon himself, to the spectacle of their failure to do so.

There are more ways than one of explaining the length and detail of Gibbon’s portrayal of Rome on the eve of the sack of 410. One is to recall

⁶⁵ p. 173. ⁶⁶ pp. 168–9. ⁶⁷ p. 191.

his statement – which must have some kind of foundation in his experience – that his original intention had been to write the decline and fall of the city, and that only later had this become the decline and fall of the empire. In this 410 is plainly a crucial moment. The city has returned to visibility and the playing of a role. We see it at the height of the enormous meaninglessness to which empire has both promoted and reduced it. Alaric will not in fact destroy or diminish it, but it will never look the same again. The collapse of an empire which took government away from it, to be conducted by legions and barbarians interacting on distant frontiers, has brought both back to encamp threateningly before its walls. Gibbon's diverse historical intentions have come together, and he can afford to present Alaric's sack (when he reaches it) as the huge event in significance he must deny that it was in practice. This significance, however, is open to a double interpretation, and how far the two are in competition is the question at the heart of our reading of the *Decline and Fall*. The pagan Zosimus and the Christian Orosius both recount the history that brought Alaric to Rome. They do not differ profoundly on the narrative of events, or on the portrayal of a corrupt and impotent city and empire; but for Zosimus the corruption is the effect, and the sack the divine punishment, of the city's abandonment of its gods, whereas for Orosius – and in a vastly enlarged sense for Augustine – both are the consequence of a paganism which must degenerate because it is not Christian and does not know the supernatural virtues: the point from which Augustine (and Tillemont) take off. Gibbon, needless to say, accepts neither the pagan nor the Christian thesis, but we should not leap to the easy conclusion that he is presenting a set of secular explanations of the sack as a replacement for both or either, for the simple reason that his account of Roman corruption would have been equally acceptable to Zosimus, Orosius and Augustine. It was metahistorically, not historically, that they differed.

Gibbon's enlargements upon Ammianus make much of the populace of Rome as crowded *lazzaroni*, herded into high-rise tenements and kept alive by a daily issue of bread baked from the corn of Africa. Without economic function,⁶⁸ they spend their time in bars, baths and brothels (the latter two of course synonymous) or at theatres and the often homicidal games of the arena. This is standard stuff, though doubtless true enough; but the emphasis on the African corn supply takes us beyond moralising into a further cause of the disruption of empire. The behaviour

⁶⁸ pp. 181–2, for the point that they are not the artisans of a commercially productive city. A separate essay could be written on Gibbon's deployment of sources both ancient and modern, aimed at presenting late antique Rome as a city neither ancient nor modern.

of Goths, Romans and the court of Ravenna is not easy to understand, and Gibbon indicates that history may not have informed us.

At the distance of fourteen centuries we may be satisfied with relating the military exploits of the conquerors of Rome, without presuming to investigate the motives of their political conduct.⁶⁹

But he has reminded us that Alaric besieged Rome on three occasions, each time with a different purpose and strategy; his twenty pages on the city's condition occur when Alaric first appears, and his references to Zosimus expire, as does Zosimus's text,⁷⁰ at the beginning of the second siege. It is hard to relate what Alaric does without considering what he was trying to do, and the Alaric of 408–10 is a somewhat elusive figure. He makes no attempt to return to Noricum-Pannonia, or to Epirus, and seems to act only within the fragmented context of western empire. Stilicho had procured for him only a subsidy from the Roman senate, and in his first siege or rather blockade he does no more than extort another; he may have been in search of nothing but money and plunder to keep his troops together. Nevertheless, he has been joined by a large barbarian contingent, led from beyond the Alps by his wife's brother Adolphus, and after lifting the blockade of Rome is found soliciting from Ravenna the rank of supreme commander 'of the forces of the West' – would these have included the forces sent against Constantine in Gaul? – and

the provinces of Dalmatia, Noricum and Venetia for the seat of his new kingdom – as Gibbon calls it –

which would have commanded the important communication between Italy and the Danube.

If this is refused him, he adds, he would be content with Noricum alone.⁷¹ Gibbon again and again emphasises Alaric's moderation, but is clearly aware that he is playing with weak cards and that his bluff does not work. Adolphus is not holding the Alpine passes for him, and though he is able to destroy a force sent against him from Dalmatia, it is soon after that we hear of a certain Gennerid or Genneridus, *magister militum* of Pannonia, Noricum, Rhaetia and Dalmatia, who supplies Honorius with ten thousand Huns, equalling the force brought to Alaric by Adolphus.⁷² If Gennerid is not a complete fiction, Alaric has been displaced from the

⁶⁹ p. 192. ⁷⁰ For his farewell to Zosimus, see p. 200, n. 97. ⁷¹ p. 193.

⁷² p. 194. Cf. Zosimus, *New History*, v, 46 (Ridley, 1982/2006, pp. 123–4), for whom Gennerid is a pagan hero, and Tillemont (*Empereurs*, v, p. 249).

Alps and confined to Italy, and when Gibbon blames the advisers of Honorius for refusing any treaty with Alaric, it can only be because this sends him once more south against Rome; but Rome is not where the power is. The symbolism of the City is outweighing *realpolitik*.

The second blockade of Rome is a siege and the opening of an actual war. Alaric lays hold of the port of Rome and is once more in a position to cut off the African corn supply;⁷³ and he has with him Attalus, a minor senator of Arian background, whom on the surrender of Rome he proclaims Augustus, thus declaring a civil war which he can end only with a collapse of the regime at Ravenna. Alaric is now a new Arbogast and there are three Augusti in the west; the aim is to panic Honorius into taking refuge in the east.⁷⁴ But Ravenna is impregnable and receives reinforcements – from Gennerid?⁷⁵ – and a new player now enters the game, reminding us of what we may have long forgotten about the structure of Roman empire. This is Heraclian, the executioner of Stilicho, who has been rewarded with the governorship of Africa, and now turns Alaric's former strategy against him by cutting off the corn supply to Rome.⁷⁶ Though Gibbon barely hints at this in vaguely allusive language, Tillemont is clear that Alaric pressed Attalus to mount an expedition against Africa, that Attalus resisted sending Gothic troops (might not a Roman senator have been better placed than a Gothic warlord to find shipping?) and that Alaric became frustrated to the point of deposing his own Augustus and sending his purple to Honorius.⁷⁷ Ravenna refuses to negotiate, and it is hard to see why Honorius's court should have done otherwise; they did not need to make war in order to refuse Alaric what he kept asking. He turns south for Rome and the third siege and the sack occur. It is at this point that the text of Zosimus's history breaks off. The moment of doom arrives.

At the hour of midnight the Salarian gate was silently opened, and the inhabitants were awakened by the tremendous sound of the Gothic trumpet. Eleven hundred and sixty-three years after the foundation of Rome, the Imperial city which had subdued and civilised so considerable a part of mankind, was delivered to the licentious fury of the tribes of Germany and Scythia.⁷⁸

The sack that follows can be related by Gibbon only from Latin sources. Procopius and Jordanes/Jornandes are contemporaries of Justinian, while as for Sozomen it will not have escaped Gibbon's notice that his language is translatable as:

⁷³ p. 197. ⁷⁴ pp. 197–9. ⁷⁵ p. 199.

⁷⁶ pp. 199–200; Tillemont, *Empereurs*, v, p. 252; Walford, 1855, pp. 414–15.

⁷⁷ p. 200. ⁷⁸ p. 201.

It is obvious that the capture of so great a city as Rome must have been attended with many remarkable circumstances; I shall therefore now proceed to the narration of such events as seem worthy of a place in ecclesiastical history.⁷⁹

To writers in the eastern empire, it has been suggested,⁸⁰ events at Rome may have seemed remote and hardly part of imperial history; but the words just quoted remind us that historians as late as Gibbon himself found it difficult to relate ecclesiastical and imperial history as interacting to form a single narrative. Gibbon's authors on the sack of 410 were churchmen and westerners, indeed far westerners – Orosius from Spain, Augustine from Africa – and the latter at least was concerned to declare less that ecclesiastical history was part of civil than that sacred history transcended both. More immediately, both shared a double perspective on the Gothic sack of Rome. They desired, first, to present it in terms as terrible as possible, as the divine punishment of the sins of an earthly city; second, to combat the pagan suggestion that it was a consequence of Rome's abandonment of the ancient gods. Arguing that the latter had never protected the city, the Christians presented the destruction done by Alaric's men – who were Christians even if Arians – as less terrible than that wrought by the Gauls in Livian antiquity.⁸¹ This inconsistency is well represented by Tillemont, who first quotes the oratory of Jerome and (surprisingly) Pelagius on the horrors of the sack and concludes

Enfin Rome perit par la famine, par la peste, par l'épée; et elle souffrit les ravages, les carnages, les pillages, les embrasemens, et tous les autres maux qui sont ordinaires aux villes prises dans la guerre par les ennemis,

but goes on in the immediately following chapter to say that there occurred

adoucements, dont on ne trouve point d'exemple dans les autres guerres, et qu'on ne pourroit attribuer qu'au nom de J.C., dont les Gots faisoient profession, quoique ce fust dans l'heresie Arienne.⁸²

[At last Rome perished by famine, plague and the sword; and suffered the devastation, the massacres, the lootings, the conflagrations and all the other evils which are usual in cities taken by enemies in war ...

... mitigations of which no examples can be found in other wars, and which can only be attributed to the name of Jesus Christ, which the Goths professed although in Arian heretical form.]

⁷⁹ Walford, 1855, p. 417. ⁸⁰ e.g., Pelikan, 1987, pp. 76–7.

⁸¹ Deferrari, 1964, pp. 76, 355.

⁸² Tillemont, *Empereurs*, v, pp. 257, 258–9 ('triomphe de J.C. dans le saccagement de Rome').

Gibbon follows, but makes some attempt to reverse, this double judgement. He gives due emphasis to Alaric's command that while plunder is permissible, massacre is not, and to various edifying tales of respect shown to church ornaments, holy vessels and their pious protectors. No doubt he saw this as further evidence of the spread of superstition among Christians and barbarians, and it is in this context that he makes one of his very few allusions to the greatest of his adversaries.

The learned work concerning the City of God was professedly composed by St. Augustin, to justify the ways of Providence in the destruction of the Roman greatness. He celebrates with peculiar satisfaction this memorable triumph of Christ, and insults his adversaries by challenging them to produce some similar example of a town taken by storm, in which the fabulous gods of antiquity had been able to protect either themselves or their deluded votaries.⁸³

And after this less than full account of the argument put forward by Augustine, Gibbon goes on to say that examples of Gothic moderation were probably far fewer than cases of plunder, extortion, massacre and rape committed during the sack. On the last of these atrocities, he continues to display an unpleasing facetiousness which will recur in other chapters, enquiring into the 'casuistry' of Augustine – patronisingly mentioned as 'the good bishop of Hippo' – when he considers whether unwilling victims of rape have lost 'the glorious crown of virginity' in the spiritual sense, and whether suicide is a sin in those women who have preferred death to dishonour.⁸⁴ He voices one of the undying if underlying themes of the Decline and Fall when he mentions a dissertation in which the antiquarian Bargaeus has set out 'to prove that the edifices of Rome were not subverted by the Goths and Vandals'. He does not mention at this point, as Tillemont does, that once the African corn supply was resumed,

fort peu d'années après, Rome estoit tellement repeuplée et rétablie, qu'il ne paroissoit pas que les ennemis y eussent fait jamais aucun tort⁸⁵

[after a very few years, Rome was so far repopled and restored that it did not seem that her enemies had ever caused her damage],

but continues the theme of disaster by describing the throngs of well-born refugees who appeared all over the Roman world. Heraclian in Africa, he remarks,

basely sold, in matrimonial prostitution, the noblest maidens of Rome to the lust or the avarice of the Syrian merchants;⁸⁶

⁸³ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 202. ⁸⁴ pp. 203–4, nn. 102–3.

⁸⁵ Tillemont, *Empereurs*, v, p. 259. For Bargaeus see *EEG*, pp. 267, 288.

⁸⁶ Womersley, 1997, II, p. 208.

but the best known of the refugees are the pious and wealthy ladies commemorated by their spiritual advisers Augustine and Jerome. These Gibbon mentions in part as illustrating how the shock of the sack spread through the Roman world, and how

the clergy, who applied to recent events the lofty metaphors of Oriental prophecy, were sometimes tempted to confound the destruction of the capital and the dissolution of the globe.⁸⁷

It is when the image of the sack of 410 becomes Christian and apocalyptic that Gibbon is most inclined to diminish it. As he concluded chapter 16 by demonstrating that the persecution of the Christians in the third century was less lethal than the persecution of Christians by one another in the sixteenth, so he concludes this part of chapter 31 by contending that Alaric's sack in 410 was as nothing compared with the *sacco di Roma* carried out by the soldiers of Charles V in 1536.⁸⁸ At this point, however, *l'histoire événementielle* reasserts itself, and Gibbon narrates the last phase of the life of Alaric.

'The retreat of the victorious Goths, who evacuated Rome on the sixth day, might be the effect of prudence, but it was not surely the effect of fear',⁸⁹ as wrongly supposed by Socrates Scholasticus. Gibbon nowhere comments on the fact that they left Rome in a southerly direction, heading through Campania towards Calabria, and evacuating the entire theatre of action between Rome, Ravenna, Gaul and the Alpine passes, in which the complex game of warlord politics had been played out since Stilicho's attempt to keep control of Illyricum and Alaric's repeated demands for a command connecting Venetia with Pannonia. Recent historians have seen in this the total failure of Alaric's career;⁹⁰ in sacking Rome he plays his last card before a poker-faced Ravenna, and in marching south he degenerates into the captain of an army of mercenaries unemployed and on the loose. For Gibbon he remains to the end a heroic barbarian invader; his progress through Campania is accompanied by the usual pictures of the trembling sons and daughters of senators, presenting draughts of Falernian wine to Goths stretching their huge limbs beneath the plane-trees;⁹¹ and when he arrives at the Straits of Messina he envisages the conquest of Sicily and the invasion of Africa. We are not told what he knew of the state of affairs in the island, or how he intended to proceed by sea against the formidable Heraclian. Only the stories attending his sojourn at Rome and Attalus's resistance to an invasion of Africa suggest that he understood the significance of the African corn supply, and it may be that

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* ⁸⁸ pp. 208–9. ⁸⁹ p. 209, and n. 119. ⁹⁰ Heather, 2005, pp. 228–9.

⁹¹ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 211.

Gibbon is giving us a foreshadowing of the later role of the Vandal kingdom. After seeing a fleet he has collected destroyed by a storm off Reggio, Alaric dies at Cosenza and no man knows his sepulchre to this day.⁹² It is hard to think of him as the Moses of his people; Tillemont observes

qu'il n'estoit au monde que pour humilier et pour chastier Rome: après quoy n'ayant plus rien à faire, il falloit qu'il allast rendre compte au souverain maistre des conquerans, pour estre puni des crimes par lesquels il avoit puni les crimes des autres.⁹³

[he was in the world only for the humiliation and chastisement of Rome; after which, having nothing more to do, he must go to account for himself to the sovereign master of conquerors, to be punished for the crimes by which he had punished the crimes of others.]

Gibbon could never have pronounced so sternly Augustinian a judgement; yet his account of Alaric remains ambiguous and incomplete. The role of the Goths in the western Decline and Fall continues.

(VI)

Approximately one-third of chapter 31⁹⁴ remains to be completed from this point, and the narratives it contains are not easy to follow. The reader is left to discover that Gibbon is not presenting a unified narrative of the remainder of Honorius's reign, with the problems and events that constitute its history presented in chronological order, but dealing with it province by province, in a series of narratives that overlap with one another in real time, and so interact in ways not always clear to the modern reader. At the outset of his account of the joint reign of Valentinian I and Valens, Gibbon had warned that he was about to do this;⁹⁵ here he does not, and his history is further fragmented by the decision to treat the eastern empire in a separate chapter, to be interpolated before the reign of Honorius has reached its end. It may also be considered the case that we have reached the point where Gibbon's narrative style glides so smoothly from one event or theme to its neighbour that readers have been known to complain that they are not sure what is happening. We are already unsure just how Alaric's sack of Rome fits into the larger narrative of Decline and Fall, and chapter 31 deepens our perplexity by its refusal to present that narrative in chronological order, but instead proceeds in a provincial sequence, dealing successively with events in Italy, Gaul, Spain and Britain (to which last the provinces as western

⁹² p. 212. ⁹³ Tillemont, *Empereurs*, v, p. 261. ⁹⁴ Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 212–36.

⁹⁵ Above, p. 232.

Gaul known as 'Armorica' may be added). To begin with Italy: at the death of Alaric his successor Adolphus⁹⁶ – we are assured by Orosius that he had heard someone say that he had heard Adolphus say⁹⁷ – considers setting up a Gothic empire in the place of the Roman, but reflecting that Goths are incapable of civil government enters into a treaty with the ministers of Honorius. This delivers Italy south of Rome from the Gothic occupation, and delivers the Goths from the need to create a lasting regime. It further delivers Ravenna from the obligation to recover southern Italy from the Goths, and

they readily accepted their service against the tyrants and barbarians who infested the provinces beyond the Alps. Adolphus, assuming the character of a Roman general, directed his march from the extremity of Campania to the southern provinces of Gaul,⁹⁸

by just what routes on land or water we are not told, and rapidly acquires territory as far as Bordeaux on the Atlantic coast. The history of the post-Roman west begins from this Gothic settlement. Though deflected from Marseilles by the Roman regional commander, he seems to be acting as a Roman ally; and this impression is reinforced by the account of his marriage to Galla Placidia, the daughter of the great Theodosius, and the birth of a short-lived child to whom they give that name. Adolphus would seem to be marrying into the imperial succession, as Stilicho had indirectly done before him, and 'the tyrants beyond the Alps' clearly include any rival Augusti to be found there. But the pages following record the recovery of Italy under Roman rule, once the Goths are gone, by such civil measures as tax relief, repopulation, and the resumption of the African corn supply, and this narrative continues till 413, when it is interrupted by an episode related in terms obviously improbable to Gibbon: Heraclian, count of Africa, declares himself emperor, lands at Ostia, the port of Rome, with the largest fleet in recorded history, is instantly defeated by the regional forces, flees back to Africa in a single ship and is promptly executed on his return.⁹⁹ Clearly something happened, and Gibbon's need to relate what his sources tell him is heightened by his knowledge that the occupation of Africa by the Vandals will in a future chapter play a crucial role in the disruption of Mediterranean commerce and empire, and the decline of the city of Rome. But the episode is rendered crucial to chapter 31 by the passing remark that the 'remains' of Heraclian's 'private fortune'

⁹⁶ Gibbon's preferred spelling; p. 192, n. 80.

⁹⁷ Deferrari, 1964, VII, 43; Gibbon, p. 212. ⁹⁸ p. 213.

⁹⁹ pp. 217–18; Orosius and Tillemont support this narrative, but Gibbon's footnotes (146 and 147) are highly sceptical.

were granted to the brave Constantius, who had already defended the throne which he afterwards shared with his feeble sovereign.¹⁰⁰

With the portrait of this general¹⁰¹ the narrative returns to the history of empire and the history of Gaul, and moves back in time to a chronology that sharply alters our perception of both Adolphus and Alaric before him.

We are made aware – though it takes careful study of Gibbon’s text and his marginal headings and datings – that during the whole period of Alaric’s incursion into Italy, his dealings with the court and the senate, his raid on Rome and his advance or retreat southward, the army of the western empire, coming under Constantius’s command, was engaged against Constantine of Britain, who had declared himself Augustus in Gaul and Spain. This war, complicated by the further rebellion of Constantine’s principal general, was terminated by Constantius’s capture of Arles and with it of Constantine himself, who was executed in November 410,¹⁰² three months after the sack of Rome and well into Alaric’s march south. The latter events thus acquire a context other than that of their world-historical symbolism, and the reader of chapter 31 comes to realise that when Adolphus transplanted his Goths to Gaul in 412, it was not simply as the ally of Honorius against his rivals, but as one more actor in the confused scene which followed the fall of Constantine. New claimants to the role of Augustus appeared, and no actor could escape ambiguity; it was impossible – even perhaps for Constantius – to offer to maintain Roman authority without seeming to usurp it. Even the ridiculous Attalus reappears, first as conducting the music at the marriage of Adolphus and Placidia, then to be again elevated and deposed in the scrambles for power in which the Gothic kingship is caught up. Adolphus, having seized Barcelona in the name of Honorius, is there murdered, and Placidia made captive, in a clan feud; but the Goths choose a new king of the name of Wallia, who at first shows signs of independent ambitions. He marches through Spain to the cape which is now Gibraltar, and casts eyes on the crossing to Africa, which Gibbon will not allow us to forget; but, deterred by a providential storm and ‘the real or supposed approach of a numerous army, under the conduct of the brave Constantius’,¹⁰³ enters into a treaty and establishes imperial Roman control of most of Spain by defeating the Vandals and other barbarians. Placidia is liberated; Attalus is exiled to Lipari as the last of the pretenders; Honorius enters Rome in triumph; and Constantius, whose marriage to Placidia – not mentioned

¹⁰⁰ p. 218. ¹⁰¹ pp. 220–1. ¹⁰² p. 221; Gibbon’s marginal heading.

¹⁰³ p. 227; Gibbon’s repeated epithet for a leader whom his division into chapters prevents him from treating as fully as does a modern historian (Heather, 2005, pp. 241–51) who sees him as all but restoring the western empire.

till the beginning of chapter 33 – makes him co-emperor with Honorius, rules until his death by disease seven months later. He leaves a son by Placidia, who will succeed Honorius as Valentinian III.

Gibbon breaks off the narrative in chapter 31 before this death, and follows it with a narrative of the reign of Arcadius in chapter 32, where the history of the eastern empire is related independently of that of the western. What occurred in the latter when Constantius's death was followed by that of Honorius we do not learn until chapter 33. In the last pages of chapter 31 Gibbon moves suddenly into a mode of historiography he has not previously attempted: a portrayal of the post-imperial condition of both Gaul and Britain, anticipating what he will later have to say about their history as medieval kingdoms. We may recall his earlier remark that in Britain, Gaul and Spain, the usurper Maximus controlled what would become the three dominant monarchies of modern Europe;¹⁰⁴ the trans-alpine sector of the Roman empire is to shape future history. More immediately, its history under barbarian control enables, or obliges, Gibbon to consider what is to be meant by both Decline and Fall as 'the triumph of barbarism and religion' – even though the last term goes almost unmentioned.

[T]he successors of Alaric fixed their royal residence at Toulouse . . . About the same time, in the last years of the reign of Honorius, the GOTHs, the BURGUNDIANS and the FRANKS, obtained a permanent seat and dominion in the provinces of Gaul,¹⁰⁵

the Franks in Lower Germany, the Burgundians in Upper, and the Goths in Aquitaine. Gibbon begins to follow historians writing at times to him very recent – Dubos for the Franks, Mascov for the German peoples in general – in pursuit of a history of Roman–barbarian relations which will become a history of national kingdoms; and the history he presents of the barbarisation of the western empire is from its outset deliberately ambivalent.

The ruin of the opulent provinces of Gaul may be dated from the establishment of these barbarians, whose alliance was dangerous and oppressive, and who were capriciously impelled, by interest or passion to violate the public peace. A heavy and partial ransom was imposed on the surviving provincials . . . the fairest and most fertile lands were assigned to the rapacious strangers . . . and the trembling natives relinquished with a sigh the inheritance of their fathers. Yet these domestic misfortunes, which are seldom¹⁰⁶ the lot of a vanquished people, had been felt and inflicted by the Romans themselves, not only in the insolence of foreign conquest, but in the madness of civil discord.

¹⁰⁴ Above, p. 282. ¹⁰⁵ pp. 228–9; Gibbon's capitals.

¹⁰⁶ Could Gibbon have omitted 'not' before 'seldom'?

He contrasts the experience of Virgil, violently dispossessed by a soldier in the civil wars that destroyed the republic, with that of Paulinus of Bordeaux, who

received a sum of money from his Gothic purchaser, which he accepted with pleasure and surprise; and, though it was much inferior to the real value of his estate, this act of rapine was disguised by some colours of moderation and equity. The odious name of conquerors was softened into the mild and friendly appellation of the *guests* of the Romans; and the barbarians of Gaul, more especially the Goths, repeatedly declared that they were bound to the people by the ties of hospitality, and to the emperor by the duty of allegiance and military service. The title of Honorius and his successors, their laws and their civil magistrates, were still respected in the provinces of Gaul, of which they had resigned the possession to the barbarian allies; and the kings, who exercised a supreme and independent authority over their native subjects, ambitiously solicited the more honourable rank of master-generals of the Imperial armies. Such was the involuntary reverence which the Roman name still impressed on the minds of those warriors who had borne away in triumph the spoils of the Capitol.¹⁰⁷

The barbarians were busy becoming as Roman as they could. Gibbon is placing himself in the history of two great historiographical disputes. The first is the controversy, not extinct at the present day, as to whether the Decline and Fall was a fall or a transformation; and he is plainly aware that it was both. The termination of western empire was carried out in the emperor's name, and could be reduced to the simple question whether there was any longer a need for a western Augustus. The second, conducted by Boulainvilliers, Montesquieu, Dubos and Mably, was the more strictly French debate between a *thèse royale*, in which the Frankish kings had been Roman commanders and the Roman law defined both their authority and the tenure of land, and a *thèse nobiliaire*, in which the *noblesse de l'épée* were the descendants of Frankish conquerors and Frankish law defined both their rights to their domains and their duty to their king.¹⁰⁸ Where Gibbon stood in this controversy does not here appear; but neither debate could be conducted in the context provided by the remaining province with which this chapter has to deal.

Honorius and Stilicho had expressly abandoned Britain 'without defence, to the Saxon pirates and the savages of Ireland and Caledonia' (not an Ossianic sentiment). Enjoined by their emperor to defend themselves without the legions, 'they assembled in arms, repelled the invaders, and rejoiced in the important discovery of their own strength'.¹⁰⁹ Gibbon is no primeval nationalist or patriot, and gives few or no authorities for this

¹⁰⁷ pp. 229–30 for the whole passage. Gibbon's emphasis.

¹⁰⁸ See further below, [ch. 22](#). ¹⁰⁹ p. 231.

reading. He is making use of the image – for which he lacks either written histories or recorded laws – of Britain as a Roman province thrown back on its own resources, in order to conduct three speculative enquiries with which he closes this chapter. The first is marginal to the history of Britain itself. The British example is followed in the ‘maritime provinces’ of Gaul known as ‘Armorica’, where – though he does not yet say so – Gallo-Roman resistance will be found during the conquests of Clovis the Frank, and cross-Channel migrations will give some of the provinces the new name of Brittany, and the island itself that of Britannia Major. But ‘the vain, inconstant, rebellious disposition of the people’ – are we reading a French or an English prejudice against the Celts? – was incompatible with either freedom or servitude; Armorica ‘could not long maintain the form of a republic’ and ‘after the usurpers of Gaul had successively fallen, the maritime provinces were restored to the empire’.¹¹⁰ The Atlantic west is the only region of the empire in which Gibbon finds it worthwhile imagining the Romanised natives asserting their freedom as the legions are withdrawn; but they do so unsuccessfully.

Britain presents the image in a stronger form; and here Gibbon is able to use ancient evidence to experiment with a modern philosophical history of the transition from Rome to Europe. He concedes in a footnote that this history is conjectural.

I owe it to myself and to historic truth to declare that some circumstances in this paragraph are founded only on conjecture and analogy. The stubbornness of our language has sometimes forced me to deviate from the conditional into the indicative mood.¹¹¹

Something is going on that we have not met before in the *Decline and Fall*. Gibbon is consciously turning from ancient narrative and philological erudition – as Momigliano saw him doing – to philosophical history of society; but he is criticising what this turn is doing to his own method, narrative and language. He makes the turn by supposing – on the authority partly of Zosimus and partly of a pseudo-medieval chronicle¹¹² which has turned out to be a fiction – that the withdrawing Romans ceded or returned authority to the ‘cities’ of Britain, of which no fewer than thirty-three were recognised as administrative entities. Here it is likely, though not acknowledged in his text or footnotes, that he was indebted to the second and third chapters of Book III of the *Wealth of Nations*, in which his friend Adam Smith had considered the extent and effects of the survival of cities and towns ‘after the fall of the Roman empire’. Here, as a recent

¹¹⁰ pp. 231–2. ¹¹¹ p. 232, n. 179; Gibbon’s emphases.

¹¹² That of ‘Richard of Cirencester’, *ibid.*, n. 181.

interpreter has shown,¹¹³ Smith had presented the barbarian invaders as shepherd peoples, and argued that the ancient republic, whose conquering virtue was based on the subjugation and exploitation of the lands about it, could never survive their impact, and that only the 'modern' commercial republic had survived the fall of empire to contribute to the growth of a post-feudal Europe. Gibbon, prepared to see the Gothic *hospites* as not incompatible with the Gallo-Roman landed aristocracy, might have thought this narrative a little over-projected; but in Britain the invading barbarians were not Scythian warriors in search of Roman military governorships, but 'the savages of Ireland and Caledonia', with the seaborne Saxons not yet engaged in settlement. He therefore imagined post-Honorian Britain as governed by an alliance of Roman-British cities, a landed aristocracy tempted to revert to the warrior culture of the tribes or clans whose hereditary chiefs they still were, and a clergy regrettably preoccupied with putting down the Pelagian heresy.¹¹⁴ It is tempting – and surely tempted the late Hugh Trevor-Roper – but utterly unsupported by anything in Gibbon's text, to see in this something of an English image of pre-Enlightened Scotland; but the English, in the form of the piratical Saxons, have yet to take shape as a people,¹¹⁵ and Gibbon is not here obliged to consider why the British alliance collapsed when faced by them, transforming the countryside into a proto-feudal landscape exploited and defended by local lords.

So long as the cities last, however, Gibbon is able to entertain a historical vision as old as Leonardo Bruni's account of the Etruscans: instead of the military despotism of Roman virtue, destroying itself as it destroyed all others, the *république fédérative* of free cities in alliance with one another.

It is somewhat remarkable, or rather it is extremely natural, that the revolt of Britain and Armorica should have introduced an appearance of liberty into the obedient provinces of Gaul. In a solemn edict,

Honorius, or someone acting in his name, is said to have proposed an annual assembly of 'the seven provinces of Gaul' (evidently Aquitaine) composed of imperial officers, the magistrates and probably bishops of sixty cities, and a selection of wealthy landowners.

who might justly be considered as the representatives of their country. They were empowered to interpret and communicate the laws of their sovereign; to expose the grievances and wishes of their constituents; to moderate the excessive or unequal weight of taxes; and to deliberate on every subject of local or national

¹¹³ Hont, 2009.

¹¹⁴ pp. 232–4; Gibbon does not usually consider British history at such length.

¹¹⁵ pp. 235–6.

importance . . . If such an institution, which gave the people an interest in their own government, had been universally established by Trajan or the Antonines, the seeds of public wisdom and virtue might have been cherished and propagated in the empire of Rome . . . and the country would have been defended against a foreign enemy by the arms of natives and freemen. Under the mild and generous influence of liberty, the Roman empire might have remained invincible and immortal; or if its excessive magnitude, and the instability of human affairs, had opposed such perpetual continuance, its vital and constituent members might have separately preserved their vigour and independence.¹¹⁶

It is tempting to find the shadows of the American or prophetically the French revolutions in this passage,¹¹⁷ though Adam Smith might have said the ancient republic was incapable of playing the role here demanded and questioned whether the empire had gone far enough towards converting the ancient into the modern. What is clearer is that Gibbon is here giving us a fundamental cause – it is too soon to debate whether the fundamental – for the Decline and Fall considered as a long-term process: the self-destruction of the ancient republic. The degradation of the cities by the armies had begun in the last age of the republic, and the era of the ‘five good emperors’ is the last, and probably only an ideal, moment at which this transformation of military empire into a commonwealth of parliamentary monarchies could have been imagined, let alone effected. Over-taxation and the conscription of city elites to enforce it had gone on for over a century, and Honorius is pained and surprised to find that the elites of Gaul think he is merely re-imposing their role as *curiales* and *decuriones*. ‘This imaginary gift of a free constitution’ is ‘the last and most cruel insult of their conquerors’,¹¹⁸ and even if Honorius or some reforming minister had meant well, it is not clear that Gibbon thinks the Gauls were wrong in so supposing it.

¹¹⁶ pp. 235–6.

¹¹⁷ For the American: I recall, though I cannot now identify, a conference paper which argued that ‘Armorica’ was intended to be ‘America’, and that this passage was retrospective advice to the Crown in its dealings with the colonial assemblies. There was no need to call them into an autonomous existence they were already asserting in arms. For the French: it is possible to imagine Gibbon in 1777 hearing talk of a summoning of the Estates General, as occurred twelve years later.

¹¹⁸ p. 236.

18 Vandals and Huns: the twin empires and the loss of Africa

(I)

The division of the Roman world between the sons of Theodosius marks the final establishment of the empire of the East, which, from the reign of Arcadius to the taking of Constantinople by the Turks, subsisted one thousand and fifty-eight years in a state of premature and perpetual decay.¹

These sentences, which open chapter 32, situate Gibbon, and his readers, at a crucial – perhaps a doom-laden – moment in the evolution of the *Decline and Fall*. In his preface of 1776, he had entered into a compact with the Public to pursue his history as far as the end of Roman empire in the west,² and was now within a few chapters – we do not know how many months³ – of discharging that obligation, as in his preface of 1781 he was to declare he had done.⁴ In both prefaces, however, he had declined to incur any such obligation with regard to the history of the eastern empire whose centre was Constantinople, and had indicated that he would pursue this only if the Public seemed to demand it. In the event he did so, fulfilling also his declared intention of returning to the history of medieval Rome once he had recounted the fall of Constantinople in 1453; but we may doubt whether he wrote in response to the demand of the booksellers and the Public, or in response to internal driving forces which made his obligation one (however conflicted) to himself. The three volumes which pursue history to 1453 did not appear until 1788, seven years after their predecessors; and it will be claimed that they call for a separate enquiry from that being concluded in the present volume. Gibbon was by then no longer studying the decline and fall of the empire achieved by the Roman republic and principate.

¹ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 237. ² *Ibid.*, I, pp. 2–3.

³ For what can be said of the dating of Gibbon's completing of the final chapters of Volume III, see *EGLH*, pp. 149–50. Professor Craddock thinks he was engaged in correcting the proofs of both volumes during the summer of 1780.

⁴ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 3.

That history possessed eastern dimensions of great significance, but its central narrative was western, beginning in Rome itself and reaching its climactic Fall in the loss of the western provinces and the end of the succession of western emperors. After that point, it possessed western consequences, set out by Leonardo Bruni in the fifteenth century and the authors of the 'Enlightened narrative' in the eighteenth:⁵ the history of the barbaric and feudal kingdoms, the Roman papacy, the western empire and the city republics. The survival of the empire of Constantinople presented a history which was hard to see as having a comparable narrative, or, as Gibbon's language has begun to hint, any narrative at all. Bruni's contemporary Flavio Biondo, writing at the time of the fall of Constantinople, had asked whether eastern history presented a moment of *inclinatio* like that of the Decline and Fall, and had suggested that it might be located in the Arab Muslim conquests of the seventh century.⁶ These great events were radically unlike those in western history; the Arabs had not been barbarians and their religion was not Christian but Muslim. As Gibbon had realised in his schoolboy years, to write their history would have been a gigantically different enterprise; and even to think of it raised a question nearly as vast and unfamiliar. Was or was not the eastern empire truncated by Arabs and conquered by Turks a continuation of the Roman empire and its Decline and Fall?

In his first and second volumes, Gibbon had explored the possibility that it was: that Constantine was primarily the successor of Diocletian in transforming the empire into a military-bureaucratic structure ruled from the frontiers, which had exploited the cities and the provinces through over-taxation, and failed in the end through its lack of civic energy and capacity. But this did no more than present Constantinople as another Nicomedia, one of the chain of fortress capitals – Trier, Milan, Sirmium – from which emperors watched the barbarians and one another. The new capital on the Bosphorus demanded more than this from the historians, and in chapter 17 Gibbon had begun to portray it as the site of a new governing culture and a new style of empire, in which 'Byzantium' – he began to use the name in adjectival form – was not Rome and had another history. There began to take shape a Christian orientalism, in which Constantinople, with its ritualised palace monarchy and bureaucracy, appeared more Asian than Mediterranean, its church – though this had yet to appear in the *Decline and Fall* – more patriarchal than papal. In chapter 32 Gibbon went further in developing this image and confining it within its own history.

⁵ *NCG*, chs. 2, 8, 18; *FDF*, chs. 8, 12, 14. ⁶ *FDF*, ch. 9.

The sovereign of that empire assumed and obstinately retained the vain, and at length fictitious, title of Emperor of the ROMANS; and the hereditary appellations of CAESAR and AUGUSTUS continued to declare that he was the legitimate successor of the first of men, who had reigned over the first of nations.⁷

The fiction was maintained down to 1453 and even beyond it; although the palace of Constantinople rivalled, and perhaps excelled, the magnificence of Persia; and the eloquent sermons of St. Chrysostom celebrate, while they condemn, the pompous luxury of the reign of Arcadius.

Gibbon gives a long extract from these sermons,⁸ portraying not only the wealth but the hieratic character of the ornamentation that portrayed the emperor as a divine ruler. In what sense this was a fiction he does not yet explain, but he emphasises that an empire whose frontiers were the Adriatic and the Tigris was held together, and the image of its ruler sustained, by 'the impregnable strength of their capital . . . on the verge of Europe and Asia'.⁹ He does not tell us how that capital maintained its control over provinces which shrank intermittently for a thousand years, but did not break apart to form a radically new culture, as did those west of the Adriatic. This is the European history Gibbon knows because he lives in it, and it is possible that he cannot easily imagine any other.

The populous countries of that empire were the seat of art and learning, of luxury and wealth; and the inhabitants, who had assumed the language and manners of Greeks, styled themselves, with some appearance of truth, the most enlightened and civilised portion of the human species. The form of government was a pure and simple monarchy; the name of the ROMAN REPUBLIC, which so long preserved a faint tradition of freedom, was confined to the Latin provinces; and the princes of Constantinople measured their greatness by the servile obedience of their people. They were ignorant how much this passive disposition enervates and degrades every faculty of the mind. The subjects who had resigned their will to the absolute commands of a master were equally incapable of guarding their lives and fortunes against the assaults of the barbarians, or of defending their reason from the terrors of superstition.¹⁰

Only Latins, we are to understand, have a historiography, perhaps even a history; because only they remember, and can narrate, the freedom of the republic and its self-destruction, the principate and its third-century transformation, the empire of the frontiers and its Decline and Fall. We are left to assume that there is no Greek historical narrative looking back to the heroic city-states, Athens and Sparta, and their mutual destruction related by Thucydides and Xenophon, proceeding through their subjugation by the

⁷ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 237. Gibbon's capitals.

⁸ pp. 237–8. For his sources for this, *ibid.*, n. 1. ⁹ p. 238. ¹⁰ *Ibid.* Gibbon's capitals.

Macedonian kingdoms and then by Rome. Polybius and Livy had told the last part of this story, but it is not a classical Greek historical memory that Gibbon has in mind. Hellenised Asians, Syrians and Egyptians have never known any form of government but a *basileia*, and do not imagine or remember a *politeia* preceding it. Latins and Hellenes are equally in the grip of the loss of virtue and energy that comes of the loss of liberty; but now Gibbon encounters the difficulty that there is no other historical process known to him than this. In Latin history he had recounted it from a starting point in the age of the Antonines, while admitting that he could as well have reckoned it from the time of Augustus or even Sulla and Marius; and once the causes of Decline (the 'secret poison') were established, there was no more to do than continue the narrative until the Fall, and ask why the causes took so long to produce their effects. In Latin history, barbarism and religion emerged as Decline and Fall reached its climax; but in the history it is well to term 'Byzantine', the causes and their effects were present at the moment of foundation, and only the impregnability of the capital city could be adduced as the reason why the Fall was prolonged over a thousand-year period. This is why Gibbon describes eastern history as 'premature and perpetual decay'; he means that it contains no narrative of its own making. It is still easier to criticise this view of history than it is to replace it; the Latin narrative crowds out the Greek (and the Arabic). A further consequence for Gibbon was that the 'Byzantine' history he knew was more that of a monarchy in a palace than that of an empire over provinces.

There is a further and more immediate problem which now emerges. Since the joint rule of Valentinian I and Valens, and now with that of Honorius and Arcadius, Gibbon has been insisting on the increasing separation between the empires *in occidente* and *in oriente*, and on their distinct rather than conjoint histories. He has more than once declared his intention of postponing the eastern history while he recounts the western (much, it must be added, as he postpones ecclesiastical history while he recounts imperial). But Danubian geography means that this cannot always be done; the disaster at Adrianople is no distant cause of Alaric's invasion of Italy; and Gibbon here observes:

The first events of the reign of Arcadius and Honorius are so intimately connected, that the rebellion of the Goths and the fall of Rufinus have already claimed a place in the history of the West,¹¹

while remaining events in the history of the east. The two histories are not only connected, but sometimes identical; and though Gibbon will more

¹¹ p. 239.

than once suggest that disasters in the west are received with secret joy by the palace intriguers of Constantinople, he is about – if not in the reign of Arcadius, at least in those of his successors – to recount episodes of eastern intervention in the western imperial succession and attempts to control western barbarians. If these attempts usually fail, their failures are momentous and not to be ignored; but his decision to treat eastern history separately, while doubting if it possesses any narrative of its own making, means that such attempts usually appear as incidents in western history. We must therefore see what can be made of chapter 32 as a narrative of the history of the eastern empire.

The assassination of Rufinus by the returning troops of Gainas the Goth having been already related,¹² Gibbon proceeds to the rule of his successor as chief minister: the eunuch Eutropius, target of a long and vicious satire by the poet-historian Claudian.¹³ Eunuch rule is enough to mark the eastern empire as an oriental specimen of palace government; in the west there is no stable capital – Rome and even Ravenna do not quite qualify – in which counsellors, generals, women and eunuchs can intrigue for power around the person of the prince, so that Arcadius in Constantinople is a different kind of *roi fainéant* from Honorius in Ravenna. Gibbon interestingly remarks that Eutropius enacts a law making the emperor's officers as sacred as his person, and failure to denounce intrigues against any of them a capital offence even in the kindred of the guilty. A law making the intention to act, and even knowledge of the intention, as criminal as the act itself had made its way, thanks to Bartolus of Sassoferrato, into the jurisprudence of European monarchies;¹⁴ Gibbon mentions the condemnation of de Thou by the courts of Richelieu,¹⁵ and might – had he been more of a historian of England – have added the case of Algernon Sidney. It is an early instance of his interest in Roman law, which he will not develop until many chapters later,¹⁶ and of his doubts concerning its inherently absolutist and even despotic character.

The fall of Eutropius is a product of the sequence of civil wars brought about through the rivalries of Gothic generals – Tribigild, Gainas, Fravitta – in the service of Constantinople. These might appear the eastern version of the collapse taking place in the western empire, but are in fact sharply different. Tribigild's rebellious Goths are quartered in the Asian province of Phrygia, and Gibbon more than once¹⁷ mentions the determined resistance of 'the peasants of Pamphylia' (another province) as contributing to their defeat. Gainas when sent against the Goths is so far disgusted with the feebleness of Eutropius that he connives with Tribigild

¹² pp. 109–11 (chapter 29). ¹³ pp. 239–42. ¹⁴ pp. 244–5. ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, nn. 18–20.

¹⁶ Vol. iv, ch. 44. ¹⁷ pp. 246–7.

and ultimately joins him; and the eunuch is overthrown by the combined energies of the emperor's wife Eudoxia and St John Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople and eminent among the Christian saints. Constantinople is a world distant from Milan or Ravenna; unlikely forms of power, female and ecclesiastical, join to strengthen the imperial will, and we must ask what is becoming of Gibbon's premise that the servile Byzantines could defend themselves against neither barbarism nor religion. When Theophilus the 'bold, bad' bishop of Alexandria¹⁸ invades the city with an army of Egyptian monks intending to depose Chrysostom, the people of Constantinople rise in support of their bishop;¹⁹ when Gainas joins Tribigild in open rebellion, his troops are slaughtered in the streets;²⁰ and when, after being defeated by the imperial navy in an attempt to cross the Hellespont, he seeks refuge in the *barbaricum* of Danubian Scythia, he is disposed of by a friendly Hunnish king who sends his head as a gift to Constantinople.²¹ We do not seem to be reading of an empire disintegrated by the failures of *receptio* along its frontiers. What is harder to understand is that, though Gibbon's chronology, disclosed in his marginal datings,²² places these Gothic wars immediately after – almost contemporary with – Alaric's rebellion and his raid through Greece, the eastern decision to treat Stilicho's march against him as a hostile action, and Alaric's subsequent march from Epirus through Pannonia into Italy, there seems not to be a word in chapter 32 to suggest that the two series of events were interrelated or shed light on one another. It is as if eastern and western history took place in two linked but separate universes; a consequence, we might further suppose, of Gibbon's doubts whether the eastern empire possessed a history at all.

There are, however, historical occurrences peculiarly eastern to be narrated in chapter 32. Gibbon proceeds to the quarrel between 'the fair and artful Eudoxia'²³ – under a weak prince, women become significant actors – and John Chrysostom: nearly the last event in the volumes of 1781 which may be styled one in ecclesiastical history. It is related at the length²⁴ which the corpus of writings by or about the saint commands, and Gibbon treats him with respect; but he is neither a Gregory Nazianzen happy to withdraw from ecclesiastical politics, nor an Ambrose of Milan devastatingly skilled in the politics of the Spirit, and the tale of the empress's persecution and the bishop's Christian patience (but energetic correspondence while in exile) does not amount to a significant episode in the relation between church and state. Chrysostom is not quite a second Athanasius; he does not challenge heresy or established authority.

¹⁸ See above, p. 82; here IV, pp. 256–7. ¹⁹ p. 256. ²⁰ pp. 250–1.

²¹ pp. 251–2; see. above, p. 341. ²² For these see II, pp. 3–4. ²³ p. 252. ²⁴ pp. 252–9.

Eudoxia predeceases her husband, having borne a son and several daughters. The dynasty is to that extent safe and barbarian generals do not aspire to the purple; but when Arcadius himself dies in 408, his heir Theodosius II is seven years old and needs a guardian since he cannot have a colleague. Gibbon mentions with astonishment the ‘fable’ that the Persian emperor Jezdegerd was invited to act as protector;²⁵ but it seems that this was a courtesy occasionally exchanged between the two empires²⁶ and amounted to no more than a declaration of friendly intentions. Gibbon apparently does not know this, but is moved to remark, rather questionably, that

such was the absolute separation between the two [Roman] monarchies, both in interest and affection, that Constantinople would have obeyed with less reluctance the orders of the Persian, than those of the Italian court.²⁷

Perhaps there was no reuniting the two, but Constantinople will be found acting to secure the western succession. More immediately,

the great officers of the state and army, who had been appointed before the death of Arcadius, formed an aristocracy which might have inspired them with the idea of a free republic; and the government of the Eastern empire was fortunately assumed by the prefect Anthemius, who obtained, by his superior abilities, a lasting ascendant over the minds of his equals.

In a regency lasting seven years, he and his colleagues defeat and absorb a Hunnish invasion, improve the walls of Constantinople, refortify the Illyrian cities, and begin establishing a fleet on the Danube.²⁸ There is not much sign of premature and perpetual decay here; but signs of a Christian orientalism re-emerge when Theodosius reaches fourteen (an age of maturity) and his sister Pulcheria (two years older) receives the title of Augusta and begins a regime which will last forty years. She and her sisters vow perpetual virginity and convert the *gynaecium* into a ‘monastery’ within the palace from which all males are excluded; a master-stroke (if this term is not too gender-specific) within the world of dynastic politics, since power can be exercised from the shelter of sanctity and celibacy. One of history’s great big sisters, she sets about educating her brother in the rituals of government and council; and though she cannot endow him with the active virtues ‘supported by courage and regulated by discretion’ – which, Gibbon remarks, are the only virtues deserving of the name in a masculine ruler – she has solved the problem of the palace-bred successor to the extent that Theodosius II reigns many years without becoming a

²⁵ p. 261. ²⁶ Dignas and Winter, 2007, pp. 96–7, 232–3. ²⁷ Vol. II, p. 261.
²⁸ p. 262.

tool or a tyrant.²⁹ There is, needless to say, a darkly comedic side to all this; Pulcheria chooses as her brother's consort the daughter of an Athenian philosopher, who changes her name from the pagan Athenais to the Christian Eudocia, but on developing political ambitions of her own is stripped of power and obliged to spend the rest of her days in scholarly retirement at Jerusalem.³⁰ Her daughter by Theodosius will become the wife of the western emperor Valentinian III and share in the disastrous history of the other empire; but Gibbon is relating the history of a governing culture so far stable that female rule is neither impotent nor sinister.

The chapter concludes with an account of two minor wars with the Persian empire: one occasioned by an outbreak of persecution of the Christians by the Zoroastrian clergy, the other by the recurrent issue of the partition of Armenia. Both seem to take place in another world from that of the Decline and Fall; they are preceded by diplomacy, conducted by armies, and concluded by treaties which last for eighty years. We are in the presence of stable empires pursuing reason of state and the relations of war and peace. The premature and perpetual decay of the eastern empire is not much apparent in chapter 32; neither are 'decline and fall' or the 'triumph of barbarism and religion', both of which are western phenomena, eastern only to the limited extent to which eastern history is participant in them. With regard to the 'triumph of barbarism', chapter 32 breaks off with the Persian frontier stabilised, and does not arrive at the disasters attending the later reign of Theodosius and Pulcheria: the loss of Africa to the Vandals and the devastation of the Danube by the Huns. These are related in chapters 33 through 35, in which eastern history appears as it contributes to western.

So much for 'the triumph of barbarism' as we approach the western Fall. If we enquire after that of religion, however, chapter 32 is a perfect blank, and the remaining chapters of volume III little better; and this circumstance is historiographically surprising. Apart from a single reference to 'the active severity with which [Pulcheria] laboured to suppress the opposite heresies of Nestorius and Eutyches',³¹ chapter 32 has nothing to say about the great controversies over the single or dual nature of the incarnate Christ conducted at the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon in 430 and 450, or about their consequences for the government of the church or the empire's eastern provinces. These were eastern phenomena, extending beyond the empire's frontiers, and we must account for their omission by supposing that Gibbon saw this chapter, and even this volume, as western history in which that of the east took its part. He had

²⁹ pp. 263–5. ³⁰ pp. 266–8. ³¹ p. 263.

already declared his intention of postponing any treatment of the latter until that of the former was completed;³² and at the end of chapter 37 – by which point the narrative of *Decline and Fall* was ended, and it was for the Public to decide whether Gibbon's history would continue – he stated his intention of postponing eastern ecclesiastical history to a moment he did not specify. There were, he said, few western heresies that need be mentioned.

But the East was distracted by the Nestorian and Eutychian controversies, which attempted to explain the mystery of the incarnation, and hastened the ruin of Christianity in her native land. These controversies were first agitated under the reign of the younger Theodosius; but their important consequences extend far beyond the limits of the present volume. The metaphysical chain of argument, the contests of ecclesiastical ambition, and their political influence on the decline of the Byzantine empire, may afford an interesting and instructive series of history, from the general councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon to the conquest of the East by the successors of Mahomet.³³

These consequences dwarfed even those of the Arian controversy, yet played no part in the disintegration of the western empire in the fifth century. Gibbon did not in fact return to the two councils and their historical significance until chapter 47, published in 1788 as the conclusion to volume IV of the *Decline and Fall*. That volume was devoted to the reign of Justinian and chapter 47 precedes Gibbon's explanation in volume V why this and the next volumes must be constructed on principles other than those governing his history to this point.³⁴ It is not the intention of the series *Barbarism and Religion* to study the *Decline and Fall* of 1788; but we could have been given no clearer indication that the Nestorian controversy, and indeed the history of imperial dealings with the Christian church, are to play no part in Gibbon's 1781 history of the termination of Roman empire in the west. He had before him as he wrote chapter 32 the relevant volumes of Tillemont's two series, and had earlier read and not forgotten those of William Howel³⁵ – both historians deal intensively with the role of the eastern empire in the politics of the two councils – but the relations between imperial and ecclesiastical authority have made their last appearance in the volumes of 1781.

(II)

Gibbon now embarks on a group of chapters (33–36) which will conclude his narration of the western *Decline and Fall* though not his writing of

³² See above, pp. 338–39. ³³ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 450. ³⁴ *Ibid.*, III, p. 25.

³⁵ *EEG*, pp. 33–40.

volume III. They will present the exhaustion of the western empire's capacity to provide itself with a succession of effective emperors, and of the eastern empire's capacity to intervene effectively in that provision. The control and settlement of the western provinces by barbarian leaders and their followers is of less immediate (though real) importance in this process than the role of two barbarian monarchs in disrupting the communications between the two empires; and Gibbon signals this emphasis by early introducing the figure of

the terrible Genseric; a name which in the destruction of the Roman empire has deserved an equal rank with the names of Alaric and Attila.³⁶

It is illuminating to examine this judgement. Alaric's raid on Rome had been of largely symbolic importance, and his Goths ended as actors in the struggle for power in the distant west, establishing their kingdoms in Aquitaine and Spain. Genseric the Vandal, on the other hand, took over the crucial province of Africa and detached it permanently from western control; he disrupted the corn supply on which depended the wealth of the Roman aristocracy and the maintenance of the Roman proletariat; and by developing a power at sea, he frustrated the attempts of Constantinople to assert a role in support of the western empire. As for Attila, he for a while threatened the stability of both empires and did immense damage to both; but he did not even attempt the construction of a permanent state, and his lasting achievement was the devastation of the Danubian provinces forming the land corridor by which armies could pass from east to west. It is in these ways that Genseric and Attila are actors in Gibbon's narrative. He tells their stories concurrently and interactively, and it is of some importance that he puts the Vandal first.

The history of Genseric and the loss of Africa is a complex one, and the ways in which it is assembled tell us much about Gibbon's sources and how they determined the history he wrote. In the first instance, it is a dynastic history. In the palace politics of Ravenna after the death of Honorius, Galla Placidia and her infant son take refuge at Thessalonica under eastern protection, and a minor usurper assumes power in the west, supported by the powerful general Aetius and a force of Huns he has brought from Pannonia.³⁷ More by subversion than by battle and victory – the histories of Magnentius, Maximus and Arbogast are not being repeated – an eastern expeditionary force succeeds in placing the child

³⁶ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 279. The name is variously spelt (*ibid.*, n. 13) and recent historians have preferred 'Gaiseric' or 'Geizerich'. Gibbon invariably employs 'Genseric', and his usage has been followed in this volume.

³⁷ II, pp. 274–5; for Aetius, p. 278.

Valentinian III in power under the tutelage of his mother. Aetius is charged with paying off his Huns and inducing them to go home, and succeeds so well as to somehow remain a dominant force in the politics of the western court. Placidia – to whom Gibbon does not allow the skills of her half-sister Pulcheria in rising above the weaknesses of female rule³⁸ – is shown hesitant between the counsels of Aetius, who is close to her person, and the virtuous but distant advice of Count Boniface the governor of Africa. From this rivalry between ‘the last of the Romans’ the history of Genseric becomes an aspect of a narrative that may be termed ‘the tragedy of Boniface’.

In this drama Aetius emerges as a figure of shocking ambiguity. The future victor over Attila at Châlons – one of Creasy’s ‘decisive battles of history’ – he now appears a former resident among the Huns, with influence he more than once uses to bring armies of mercenaries to intervene in the wars of the western empire. He further appears a palace intriguer capable of Iago-like deceptiveness, writing simultaneously to Placidia and Boniface, both of whom he misinforms to the point where Boniface thinks he has no recourse but the rebellion Placidia has been assured he is about to launch.³⁹ Boniface invites Genseric, newly king of the Vandals in Spain, to transfer his army to Africa, and the tragedy assumes its full magnitude. The Vandal invasion becomes irreversible.

For all this Gibbon’s authority – it is also Tillemont’s, who follows it in detail – is the Byzantine historian Procopius writing in the next century: Gibbon’s guide in volume IV for the reign of Justinian, where he becomes a historian canonical as none has been since Ammianus Marcellinus.⁴⁰ No western historian contemporary with the Vandal invasion tells us the tale of Boniface’s deception by Aetius and subsequent treason and repentance, and for this interestingly pre-modern reason recent historians of advanced critical skills have rejected it. Gibbon – preceded in this by Tillemont – seriously considers whether he should accept Procopius’s story and does so because it

seems agreeable to the practice of ancient and modern courts, and would be naturally revealed by the repentance of Boniface.⁴¹

Concerning the last-mentioned, we shall see that Tillemont had his own reasons for writing as he did; but of Gibbon this episode in source-criticism tells us how far he remained an early modern historian for

³⁸ p. 277. ³⁹ pp. 278–9.

⁴⁰ For Gibbon’s use of Procopius, ‘a fabulous writer for the events which precede his own memory’, see Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1254. All references to him in the present volume fall under this description.

⁴¹ p. 278, n. 11.

whom history was still a branch of *l'étude de la littérature* and the modern's task was to judge and then follow, however doubtfully, what the ancient historian had narrated before him. Genseric's motives matter more than those of Boniface, but Gibbon leaves it unclear how far he was pursuing unlimited ambition, or withdrawing from a Spain where Romans and barbarians were competing for control.⁴² The Vandals cross into Africa so far west as to be outside Boniface's jurisdiction altogether, and begin to advance east through the Roman provinces. They receive support from the hillmen of Mount Atlas, 'a crowd of naked savages'⁴³ like those who had appeared in the rebellion of Gildo; and the narrative takes a religious turn when we read that the Donatists of Africa, recently exposed to persecution of which both Honorius and Augustine had approved, made common cause with the Arian Vandals. The *circumcelliones* – the suicide bombers of late antiquity – reappear, and 'the calendar of martyrs received on both sides a considerable augmentation'. Gibbon is able to remark, for the first and perhaps the only time, that

the intolerant spirit which disgraced the triumph of Christianity contributed to the loss of the most important province of the West,⁴⁴

but to contribute is not to be the cause. By this time Boniface has repented of his treason (if it ever occurred); his friends at court intervene and 'during the absence of Aetius', apparently in Gaul, obtain a conference at which Aetius's letters are produced and his perfidy laid bare.⁴⁵ It is too late to hold up the Vandal advance, and only the coastal cities remain in Roman control. Genseric lays siege to Hippo by land – it remains open to the sea – and it is during a fourteen-month siege that Augustine, the city's bishop, dies in 430.

Gibbon's last verdict on 'the light and pillar of the Catholic Church' begins:

the manners of the bishop of Hippo were pure and austere, and the most conspicuous of his virtues was an ardent zeal against heretics of every denomination – the Manichaeans, the Donatists, and the Pelagians against whom he waged a perpetual controversy ... According to the judgment of the most impartial critics, the superficial learning of Augustine was confined to the Latin language –

⁴² pp. 279–80; a compressed account. For a recent treatment, see Heather, 2005, pp. 265–7. The text of Merobaudes has emerged since Gibbon's time, and liberated historians from Procopius.

⁴³ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 281. Gibbon uses the language of pigmentation in confronting them with the blond and blue-eyed Vandals.

⁴⁴ pp. 281–3. ⁴⁵ p. 283.

a footnote⁴⁶ enlarges upon his ignorance of Greek –

and his style, though sometimes animated by the eloquence of passion, is usually clouded by false and affected rhetoric. But he possessed a strong, capacious, argumentative mind, he boldly sounded the dark abyss of grace, predestination, free-will, and original sin; and the rigid system of Christianity which he framed or restored has been entertained with public applause and secret reluctance by the Latin church.⁴⁷

In another footnote Gibbon remarks:

My personal acquaintance with the bishop of Hippo does not extend beyond the *Confessions* and the *City of God*,⁴⁸

a statement not quite correct, as will appear in a moment; and we are left once more wondering whether this patronising and dismissive language indicates that Gibbon did not recognise, or that he refused to recognise, the historic magnitude of Augustine's challenge to all that the *Decline and Fall* stands for: his assertion that the work of the Spirit counted for more than all of civil or ecclesiastical history. Gibbon is not demonising or even deriding Augustine; but he sees him as a promoter of everything in late antique history that Gibbon most dislikes: the proliferation of miracles (in an earlier chapter⁴⁹), the definition and persecution of heresy,⁵⁰ and the engagement in theological controversy that gave rise to intolerance and was still active in Gibbon's modern readers. Yet another footnote to this treatment runs:

The church of Rome has canonised Augustin and reprobated Calvin, yet as the *real* difference between them is invisible even to a theological microscope, the Molinists are oppressed by the authority of the saint, and the Jansenists are disgraced by their resemblance to the heretic. In the meanwhile the Protestant Arminians stand aloof and deride the mutual perplexity of the disputants (see a curious Review of the Controversy by Le Clerc, Bibliothèque Universelle, tom. xiv, p. 144–398). Perhaps a reasoner still more independent may smile in his turn when he peruses an Arminian Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans.⁵¹

Gibbon does not tell us if he has a particular commentary in mind, or what the independent reasoner would find to smile at; but the reappearance of Le Clerc reminds us how much of what we term Protestant 'Enlightenment' was Arminian in origin. In the vast library of his writings which Augustine left behind – Gibbon notes that it survived the burning of Hippo by the Vandals after his death⁵² – there may on the other hand be

⁴⁶ p. 286, n. 29. ⁴⁷ pp. 285–6. ⁴⁸ p. 285, n. 28.

⁴⁹ Above, pp. 329–30, where Gibbon's attitude towards Augustine first appeared.

⁵⁰ pp. 282–3; in particular nn. 18–23. Note Gibbon's praise of Locke and criticism of Bayle in n. 20.

⁵¹ p. 286, n. 31. ⁵² p. 285.

found an Augustinian history of these events, on which Gibbon's footnotes tell us his eye had fallen, as well as those he acknowledged having read but did not examine in detail. In Tillemont's life of Augustine – which Gibbon grimly remarks⁵³ fills up a thousand pages and the whole of volume XIII of the *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire ecclésiastique* – the great Jansenist found letters revealing the saint in the role of spiritual counsellor to Count Boniface, and paraphrased them as they occurred in chronological order⁵⁴ and in the narrative told by Procopius, which he accepted for lack of a contemporary history. They present Boniface as the hero of a spiritual, before it becomes a historical, tragedy as we expect from Augustine, but Gibbon consigned to the margin.

The story begins in Africa, before the advent of the Vandals, where Boniface, having just lost his wife, contemplates retirement to a monastery. Augustine and his friend Alypius dissuade him; his military virtue, 'sainte en luy, parce qu'elle estoit subordonnée à la foy qu'il avoit en J.C.',⁵⁵ is needed to combat the barbarians (who are heretics) and he should accept worldly honours if offered to him, without resenting their refusal,

et que pour se fortifier par des armes spirituelles, il observast une sainte et exacte continence. Boniface se resolut donc de demeurer dans le monde en cette manière, et embrasser la continence.⁵⁶

[and that in order to fortify himself with spiritual weapons, he should observe a saintly and exact continence. Boniface resolved to remain in the world under this discipline and to embrace continence.]

We must understand that for Augustine the supernatural virtues that reject the world were what gave history its meaning, so far as it had one. He and Alypius, Tillemont continues,

ne donnoient ce conseil à Boniface que parce qu'ils le croyoient le plus utile à son salut. Mais Dieu seul ne se trompe jamais; et il permit par des jugemens impénétrables, que deux des plus grands Saints aient manqué de lumière en une occasion si importante, et aient esté innocemment les ministres de la perte de Boniface et de la descente des Vandales dans l'Afrique. Ou plutost puisqu'il ne faut pas juger les choses par l'évenement, il vaut mieux dire qu'ils n'ont pas manqué de lumière, et qu'ils ont donné à Boniface le conseil que la prudence Chrétienne demandoit qu'ils luy donnassent. Mais Dieu dont la sagesse est audessus de toutes les pensées des hommes, a voulu executer les desseins de sa justice sur Boniface, sur l'Afrique, et sur tout l'Empire. Qui oseroit blâmer David d'avoir pardonné à Absalon?⁵⁷

⁵³ *Ibid.*, n. 27. ⁵⁴ *Mémoires*, XIII, chs. CCLXXII, CCCXXXII–CCCXXXVIII.

⁵⁵ 'in him sanctified because subordinated to his faith in Jesus Christ'. ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 714.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 715.

[only gave Boniface this counsel because they believed it the most conducive to his salvation. But God alone is never mistaken, and he permitted by his inscrutable judgments that two of the greatest of saints should fail in insight on an occasion of such importance, and innocently act as the instruments of the fall of Boniface and the descent of the Vandals into Africa. Or rather, since things should not be judged by their outcome, it is better to say that they did not lack wisdom and gave Boniface the counsel which Christian prudence demanded. But God, whose wisdom is above all the thoughts of men, willed to execute the patterns of his justice on Boniface, on Africa, and upon the whole empire. Who will dare blame David for the pardon of Absalom?]

Historiography has become theodicy, but the key to its pattern here is sexual abstinence as a supernatural virtue. A hundred and seventy pages later, Tillemont reports that Boniface's support of Placidia against the usurper John, and against Aetius and his Huns, raised him to a height always dangerous at court.

Mais ce qui en fut la principale cause selon les Saints, fut que se laissant vaincre à la concupiscence, il abandonna la continence qu'i avoit entrepris de garder,⁵⁸

[But the chief cause in the eyes of the saints was that, allowing himself to be overcome by concupiscence, he abandoned the abstention he had undertaken to preserve,]

and took a second wife, 'a rich heiress of Spain' according to Gibbon,⁵⁹ and since she was an Arian until their marriage, possibly a Vandal in the eyes of Cardinal Baronius.⁶⁰ What counts in the judgement of Augustine, however, is not the lady's religion or her influence over her new husband, but the sheer wrongness of a second marriage, of which its ill effects are merely signs and consequences. Gibbon would remember, though Tillemont of course did not know, the many pages in which Jean Barbeyrac, in his *Traité de la morale des Pères*, had set forth the denunciation of this practice by Fathers down to and including Augustine, and found in it ground for describing them not as moralists but as enthusiasts.⁶¹

Though Tillemont in general follows Procopius's account of both the alienation and the reconciliation of Boniface and Placidia, he warns his readers that there is no authentic, meaning no contemporary, history of the loss of Africa;⁶² nor do Augustine's letters seem to say anything of Boniface's invitation to the Vandals. They culminate as he is first resisting forces sent by the court of Ravenna against him, and then, following the intervention of his friends (one of whom is personally known to Augustine), is restored to Placidia's service and unsuccessfully resists

⁵⁸ p. 886. ⁵⁹ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 287. ⁶⁰ *Mémoires*, XIII, pp. 886–7.

⁶¹ *RFT*, pp. 270–1. ⁶² Tillemont, *Empereurs*, VI, p. 81.

the Vandal advance. Tillemont presents Augustine as saying that he is too old, too sick, and – we may add – too indifferent to worldly calamities, to pay much attention to these affairs. His advice to Boniface is overwhelmingly concerned with the problems of second marriage and continence. If the Count had no wife, he says, his counsel would be for retirement from the world; but since she married him without knowledge of his commitment to chastity, this cannot be imposed without her consent, and Boniface's only course is to

demeurer dans les bornes du mariage, et de demander à Dieu de pouvoir faire un jour ce qu'il ne pouvoit pas faire alors:

[to live within the bounds of marriage and to pray God to be able to do some day what he cannot do now:]

in short, to use a famous quotation from the saint's writings, to make him chaste but not yet.⁶³ This is the history Tillemont's Augustine has to tell of Boniface; we do not understand its preoccupation with the sexual if we do not grasp that he is not exalting the private above the public, but grace above the law. In the public sphere, and in Gibbon's narrative, it seems to be the mysterious judgements predestined by God that prevail. Augustine dies at Hippo before its fall, which even with the aid of eastern reinforcements Boniface is unable to prevent; but there now occurs a truce of some kind between Vandals and Romans, and Boniface returns to Ravenna and 'the smiles of Placidia'.⁶⁴ Here Procopius's narrative ceases.⁶⁵ 'The haughty and perfidious' Aetius invades Italy 'with a retinue, or rather with an army, of barbarian followers' – we are not told of what nationality – and the rivals meet in what is either a private battle or a personal duel – Gibbon is not sure what to make of it – in which Boniface is victorious but receives a wound

of which he expired within a few days in such Christian and charitable sentiments that he exhorted his wife to accept Aetius for her second husband.

Procopius is not the authority for this statement, and one trembles to think what Augustine would have said about it. The western empire is without both of its highly questionable champions, since Aetius is compelled 'to retire into Pannonia, to the tents of his faithful Huns'.⁶⁶ The story of Boniface is at an end, and we enter upon the next phase of the history of the Vandals in Africa.

⁶³ For the letter as a whole, *Mémoires*, XIII, pp. 887–91, esp. p. 91.

⁶⁴ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 23. ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 287, n. 33.

⁶⁶ For the episode of Aetius's return, and all words quoted, *ibid.*, p. 287 and n. 33.

(III)

Gibbon now performs another of those separations of text and postponement of thematic narrative which characterise his second and third volumes. He warns his reader:

It might naturally be expected, after the retreat of Boniface, that the Vandals would achieve without resistance or delay the conquest of Africa. Eight years however elapsed from the evacuation of Hippo to the reduction of Carthage,

and a marginal note gives these years the dates 431–9.⁶⁷ In subsequent chapters he will make it clear that the ‘reduction of Carthage’ was for two sets of reasons a fatal moment in the disintegration of the western empire: first because it put barbarians in control of the corn supply to Rome, and second because Vandals were able to defeat a series of eastern attempts to re-establish Constantinople’s role in restoring empire in Italy. He does not, however, proclaim, though perhaps he indicates, these consequences, however, until the opening of chapter 36,⁶⁸ and the two chapters intervening are devoted to the career of Attila and the Huns, without which, he will give us to understand, the significance of the Vandal kingdom in Africa cannot be fully appreciated. For the present, his sources for the years 431–9 are scanty, inadequate and often ecclesiastical,⁶⁹ and the career of Genseric, whom he is resolved to elevate into a major figure, must be related conjecturally. Genseric enters into a treaty with Valentinian III, leaving the Romans in control of the long coastline from Tangier to Tripoli along which the Vandals had advanced since 428, but which is now indefensible against attack from Spain by sea. He offers his son as a hostage, and it looks almost as if he were prepared to accept federate status within a nominal empire. Gibbon insists, however, that his ambitions were unlimited and the only dangers to his control of the provinces that mattered arose from dissensions within the Vandal camp and its Moorish allies. In proportion as Genseric is able to deal with these problems and secure his kingship, he is able to behave as an independent sovereign acting in the bad faith of *raison d’état*.

He subscribed a solemn treaty, with the hope of deriving some advantage from the term of its continuance and the moment of its violation.⁷⁰

The inadequate chronicles which are all Gibbon has to rely on permit him no narrative of how or when the treaty was broken, or the advance towards Carthage resumed, but though Procopius is of no help to Gibbon

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* ⁶⁸ Below, pp. 417–18.

⁶⁹ ‘See the Chronicles of Idatius, Isidore, Prosper, and Marcellinus’ (p. 288, n. 37).

⁷⁰ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 288.

in the history of these years, he cannot avoid writing to some degree in the hindsight furnished by knowledge of Justinian's reconquest of Africa in the following century. There is, however, a more immediate narrative to be recounted. As soon as Genseric has laid hold of Carthage – we are never told how – Gibbon enters on a description of its wealth and magnificence as the second city of the western empire,

the *Rome* (if we may use the style of contemporaries) of the African world. That wealthy and opulent metropolis displayed, in a dependent condition, the image of a flourishing republic. Carthage contained the manufactures, the arms, and the treasures of the six provinces⁷¹

of Roman Africa, and this wealth permits the city to maintain a rhetorical culture and an apparently independent magistracy. Wealth, however, is not virtue; the city does not in fact maintain itself in arms, and a principal source for Gibbon is the invective of a Christian orator against its luxury and corruption. Salvian singles out 'their impious contempt of monks and the shameless practice of unnatural lusts',⁷² and Gibbon, who has nothing but contempt for monks himself, is to some extent writing with tongue in cheek; but if luxury is measured against ancient virtue (which indeed Roman Carthage has never possessed), a philosophic historian can echo a Christian invective without presenting the Vandal conquest as divine punishment for sin. Genseric nevertheless proceeds to the spoliation of the key city in the commerce of the western empire.

Gibbon knows very well, and has indicated while pursuing the career of Alaric, that this commerce was overwhelmingly in the grain on which the city of Rome depended, but not until chapter 36 will he begin exploring the consequences of the Vandal conquest. He makes it clear, however, that this was a conquest, involving many great families of the senatorial aristocracy who owned estates in Africa as well as in Italy and elsewhere, and many of these are driven into exile for reasons including the religious. It seems to have been a matter of immediate expropriation rather than of the acceptance of *hospites*, and he tells personal stories, drawn from contemporary sources, of their sometimes edifying sufferings.⁷³ The reader will recall the comparable diaspora that occurred after the sack of Rome in 410, but there is no equivalent of Augustine and Orosius and their rewritings of history. Instead, Gibbon chooses this moment to relate the fable of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, and it is worth enquiring why and with what effect he does so.

The fable first appears half a century after the fall of Carthage, but is unrelated, except by Gibbon, to that event. The Seven take refuge from

⁷¹ *Ibid.* ⁷² p. 289; Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1259. ⁷³ pp. 290–1.

the persecution of Christians by the emperor Decius and fall into a miraculous slumber lasting till the reign of Theodosius II. As an ecclesiastical legend, it is marginal to the literatures of miracle and martyrdom; the Sleepers are not martyrs, but their preservation is miraculous and they testify to it by 'peaceably expiring'⁷⁴ once its story has been told. Gibbon transposes the narrative from the theme of miracle to that of history, using it to imagine what time travel would be like if we could pass instantaneously from one state of affairs to its remote successor. We have to imagine, read and study history, he says, since we cannot experience it otherwise then sequentially.

We imperceptibly advance from youth to age without observing the gradual, but incessant, change of human affairs; and even in our larger experience of history, the imagination is accustomed, by a perpetual series of causes and effects, to unite the most distant revolutions.

A Humean remark, except that Hume was prepared to apply it to the most immediate association between the effect and its apparent cause. Gibbon, however, is prepared to imagine the imagination itself in action, connecting cause and effect over historic time.

But if the interval between two memorable eras could be instantly annihilated, if it were possible, after a momentary slumber of two hundred years, to display the *new* world to the eyes of a spectator who still retained a lively and recent impression of the *old*, his surprise and his reflections would furnish the pleasing subject of a philosophical romance.⁷⁵

But it is easier to imagine his reflections than his surprise; we can say what changes he might perceive, but not how he might respond to the shock of perceiving them. The Sleepers, after all, preferred to fall asleep in the Lord rather than live in his continuing providence. Gibbon goes on to present his account of the changes they would see; not, as in the fable, passing from Christian suffering to Christian triumph, but from the reign of Decius – hardly one to remember with nostalgia – to that identified by Robertson as opening 'the most calamitous and afflicted' era in human history. His account includes, though it does not enumerate, three of the major steps towards Decline and Fall which the volumes of 1781 are recounting.

During this period the seat of government had been transplanted from Rome to a new city on the banks of the Thracian Bosphorus; and the abuse of military spirit had been suppressed by an artificial system of tame and ceremonious servitude – the Byzantine bureaucracy of which we have heard little since chapter 17.

⁷⁴ p. 292 ⁷⁵ p. 293.

The throne of the persecuting Decius was filled by a succession of Christian and orthodox princes, who had extirpated the fabulous gods of antiquity; and the public devotion of the age was impatient to exalt the saints and martyrs of the Catholic Church on the altars of Diana and Hercules –

the transformation of Christianity by the rebirth of polytheism after Theodosius.

The union of the Roman empire was dissolved; its genius was humbled in the dust; and armies of unknown barbarians, issuing from the frozen regions of the North, had established their victorious reign over the fairest provinces of Europe and Africa,⁷⁶

to which we can only add that things might have looked differently from Asia. The end of chapter 33 is an orchestral climax in the music of Decline and Fall; but it is fair to ask what it does *not* contribute to Gibbon's actual narrative of that process. It interrupts the history of the Vandals until that of the Huns has been recounted in the next two chapters, after which there is much more to be said about the former. There awaits us the discovery of why the histories of Genseric and Attila have to be seen as concurrent.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, concluding chapter 33.

19 Attila and Aetius: the Hun invasions of the west

(I)

Chapters 34 through 36 arrive at the climactic moment when the succession of emperors ceases in the west, but to reach it they have to traverse a scene of great historical and historiographic complexity and confusion. The Greek and Latin worlds continue to interact even after the decisive moment, and Gibbon is unable, though he wishes, to treat the history of the east as entirely separate. There is a succession of barbarian leaders arising from diverse origins and achieving the disruption of empire in different ways; and their history not only has to be written in different ways, but actually has been so written by historians both ancient and modern. Gibbon can be seen interacting with a new group of eighteenth-century writers, who affect his perception of the end of Roman empire and the European history that followed it.

Chapter 33 broke off at the moment of the Vandal occupation of Carthage, which Gibbon continues to regard as a decisive step in the breakdown of empire in the central and further west. Genseric (to continue giving his name in that form) remains the leading figure among barbarian agents of the Decline and Fall, but the history of his actions is not formally resumed until the outset of chapter 36. This is not to say that he does not remain a key actor, though perhaps a hidden one, in the events related in the two intervening chapters; but these are dominated by the history of a more spectacular if less rationally acting figure. Gibbon opens a new chapter:

The Western world was oppressed by the Goths and Vandals, who fled before the Huns; but the achievements of the Huns themselves were not adequate to their power and prosperity. . . . In the reign of *ATTILA* the Huns again became the terror of the world; and I shall now describe the character and actions of that formidable Barbarian, who alternately insulted and invaded the East and the West, and urged the rapid downfall of the Roman Empire.¹

¹ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 294. For Gibbon's historiographic comment, see *ibid.*, n. 1.

To 'urge' is to hasten, but not necessarily to cause, a result, and though Attila unites a temporary empire of diverse peoples and exerts terror over a wide area, it is never clear whether he is more than a leader of hordes on an unusual scale. The Huns are a 'Scythian' people exercising power in 'Germany'; they can devastate the frontiers of the empire and penetrate deep into its provinces, but are capable neither of replacing its structures nor of acting within them, whereas the barbarians in Gaul, Spain and Africa are capable of the latter and perhaps of the former. Attila, like his predecessor Rugilas, is a nomad raider from the steppe, who briefly attains hegemony – we should be cautious before calling it 'empire' – over a wide range of Gothic and other peoples 'who fled before the Huns', and is therefore a figure in both 'Scythian' or pastoral history and that of the more settled peoples whom the Roman term 'barbarians' principally denotes. Gibbon has therefore to study him both in the context of de Guignes's history of the Huns, Turks and Mongols, and in that of the history of European barbarism, on which the former impacts but which Gibbon must study from other written sources.

In the tide of emigration which impetuously rolled from the confines of China to those of Germany, the most powerful and populous tribes may commonly be found on the verge of the Roman provinces. The accumulated weight was sustained for a while by artificial barriers; and the easy condescension of the emperors invited, without satisfying, the insolent demands of the Barbarians, who had acquired an eager appetite for the luxuries of civilized life.²

This is the normal practice of *receptio*; the barbarians become Romanised and can be received within the empire, though there is the danger that they may dictate the terms of their reception. In the case of the Huns, however, the accidents of European geography have produced an anomaly; a 'Scythian' people still in the steppe stage of nomadism have established themselves close to the Roman frontiers, invaded and weakened by the Goths they have driven before them.

The Hungarians, who ambitiously insert the name of Attila among their native kings, may affirm with truth that the hordes which were subject to his uncle Roas, or Rugilas, had formed their encampments within the limits of modern Hungary, in a fertile country which liberally supplied the wants of a nation of hunters and shepherds. In this advantageous situation, Rugilas . . . commanded the alternative of peace or war with the two empires.³

² *Ibid.*

³ pp. 294–5. Early modern Hungarian historians are spoken of with little respect in the eighteenth-century west.

He might unleash the alarming power of his horse-archers on either side of the line dividing east and west, or he might seek peace and possible acculturation – if a people still ‘Scythian’ desired or were capable of the latter. This situation the Romans well understood, but might be losing the ability to control. In the west ‘the great Aetius’⁴ employed Hun allies or mercenaries to further his ambitions, while exploiting his ability to dismiss them at need to maintain his role as a protector of empire from within. In the east the less enterprising ministers of Theodosius II relied upon paying the Huns a subsidy the latter were tempted to regard as a tribute.

Gibbon is thus enabled, and at the same time obliged, to employ a dual historiographic strategy, reflecting the duality of Roman policies for dealing with the Huns. On the assumption that they are unassimilable and that the steppe warrior culture described earlier has never changed, he is able to depict Attila by drawing on the portraits of Genghiz and Timur in later centuries,⁵ as given by de Guignes and theorised by the stadial historians. This is philosophical history, the *peinture* of manners rather than the *récit* of actions and events; but its modern character is underwritten by the extraordinary survival in ancient literature of a first-hand history of cultural encounter. Priscus, a contemporary historian whose narrative of Theodosius’s reign might have made him another Ammianus Marcellinus had it survived in full, joined an embassy to Attila’s encampment somewhere north of the Danube, sent to negotiate tribute and the return of prisoners with the monarch himself (and if possible to arrange for his assassination); and his account of this journey happens to have survived in a Byzantine collection of embassy narratives. One of the few accounts of first-hand experience we have from the ancient historians who prized them so highly, it describes the journey through a devastated landscape, the manners and customs of the Huns as the Romans perceived them, and the frustration and bewilderment of the envoys trying to negotiate with people whose behaviour they found incomprehensible. Like most other historians ancient and modern, Gibbon devotes pages⁶ to transcribing Priscus’s narrative; but he is supplying not only an exercise in late antique field anthropology, but an explanation of why wars between the eastern empire and Attila’s confederation of hordes would not be at all like the wars, treaties and contracts for military service traditional on the empire’s frontiers and still surviving in the west. There was no work for an Aetius

⁴ p. 295.

⁵ pp. 304–5. Gibbon inserts the anecdote of how Yeh-liu Chu-tsai in the thirteenth century dissuaded the Mongols from depopulating north China by genocide.

⁶ pp. 311–18.

on the Danube frontier, and wars with the Huns would be wars between incompatibles.

The greatest of these wars comes about in 441, and has much of the character of a genocidal encounter between Others. Not altogether, however; Gibbon, following a fragment of Priscus's history, supplies it with a context wider even than the conflict between *imperium et barbaricum* in both empires. After relating a Hunnic invasion of the Persian empire, he continues:

While the powers of Europe and Asia were solicitous to avert the pressing danger, the alliance of Attila maintained the Vandals in the possession of Africa. An enterprise had been concerted between the courts of Ravenna and Constantinople for the recovery of that valuable province; and the ports of Sicily were already filled with the military and naval forces of Theodosius. But the subtle Genseric, who spread his negotiations round the world, prevented their designs, by exciting the king of the Huns to invade the Eastern empire; and a trifling incident soon became the motive, or pretence, of a destructive war.⁷

This occurs seven years before the embassy in which Priscus took part, and it is fair to wonder how diplomatic messages from Genseric could have reached Attila in his camp on the trans-Danubian plains or had much effect on his actions. But this is the first of a series of episodes in which Genseric succeeds in frustrating attempts by the twin empires to recover Carthage and Africa, and each Roman failure is presented as another step towards their disruption and the end of the western succession. Genseric – certainly never Attila – is Gibbon's candidate for the role of barbarism's master strategist. The western empire's master will be Aetius; the eastern will have, and perhaps need, none.

The 'destructive war' originates on the lower Danube, where a quarrel over local sovereignty leads to a massive assault by all the resources of Hun power on the Roman fortifications of the Illyrian frontier. The Huns

destroyed, with fire and sword, the populous cities of Sirmium and Singidunum, of Ratiaria and Marcianopolis, of Naissus and Sardica; where every circumstance, in the discipline of the people, and the construction of the buildings, had been gradually adapted to the sole purpose of defence. The whole breadth of Europe, as it extends above five hundred miles from the Euxine to the Hadriatic, was at once invaded, and occupied, and desolated, by the myriads of Barbarians whom Attila led into the field.⁸

The last sentence is an enlargement of the Latin of a near-contemporary chronicle.⁹ By 'Europe' is intended not a geographic continent, but an

⁷ p. 301. ⁸ pp. 302–3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, n. 20: 'Pene totam Europam, invasit excisisque civitatibus atque castellis, conrasit'; Gibbon's emphases.

extension of the name of a province; but Gibbon is recounting something on a catastrophic scale. These are not military fortifications, but ancient cities, the seats of government, ecclesiastical and civil;¹⁰ what is being destroyed is both a system of defence and a frontier culture, extending the full length of the Danube as far as the approaches to Italy and furnishing the chief communication system that holds the twin empires together. Clearly, siege warfare on this scale is beyond the capacity of mounted archers alone, and the Huns have acquired a capacity for destroying walls and defence works that they will soon carry as far west as Orleans and Milan. Their genocidal readiness to depopulate provinces is compared with that of the thirteenth-century Mongols; but we must begin asking whether the steppe peoples in the west are becoming assimilated to the culture of those they conquer and enlist as allies. In the negotiations – they are hardly treaties – which terminate this war, Attila demands from Theodosius tribute first and last, but also control of a stretch of territory fifteen days' journey deep on the south bank of the Danube, which is to be a debatable land where his Huns can raid and loot, but at the same time demand blackmail and protection money for refraining from doing so.¹¹ In his dealings with the eastern empire, Gibbon does not present him as anything more than a bandit chief on a continental scale. Is it in this role that Genseric is content to use him?

(II)

Gibbon's theme is here the barbarian insolence of Attila's demands for tribute, and the feebleness with which Theodosius's ministers – the eunuch Chrysaphius, not the influential Pulcheria – respond to them. But two years after the embassy described by Priscus, the emperor dies childless of a fall from his horse, Pulcheria is 'unanimously acclaimed empress of the East', and Chrysaphius is put to death without a trial. Her legitimacy is welcomed by 'the clergy and people' – never to be forgotten in the politics of Constantinople – but she recognises that she needs a consort, and protects her dedicated virginity by entering into a *mariage blanc* with the generally respected senator Marcian, formerly a staff officer of the eastern generals Aspar and Ardaburius. The eastern empire has the problem of succession under control, after 'the successive weakness of two hereditary monarchs';¹² there are no rebellious provincial

¹⁰ Sirmium had been one of the regional capitals of the tetrarchate; Singidunum and Sardica the meeting places of ecclesiastical councils under Constantius; Naissa the birthplace of Constantine.

¹¹ p. 308. ¹² For all these quotations, p. 321.

generals¹³ or turbulent barbarians within this empire; and chapter 35 of the *Decline and Fall* opens with Marcian firmly informing Attila that he may be rewarded as an ally, but that demands for tribute will be rejected in arms. Since Gibbon does not believe that the eastern empire has an army capable of defeating the Huns in the field, we need to weigh what he means when he says that Attila 'hesitated, whether he should first direct his invincible arms against the Eastern or the Western empire'.¹⁴ In the east he is a bandit warlord, with territory of his own in the plains beyond the Danube and a debatable land south of its banks, but these conditions do not exist on the Alpine or Rhenish frontiers of the west, and here Attila enters upon a different history in which he must be a different kind of actor.

In the memorable invasions of Gaul and Italy, the Huns were naturally attracted by the wealth and fertility of those provinces; but the particular motives and provocations of Attila can only be explained by the state of the Western empire under the reign of Valentinian or, to speak more correctly, under the administration of Aetius.¹⁵

Attila's western war could not be a matter of finding an open frontier on which to exact tribute and plunder, and we may even ask whether he conceived it as such. West of the Rhine lay a complex of interactions between surviving Romans and invading barbarians, in which a great deal had happened in the preceding half-century; and whatever Attila's perceptions of this theatre – we know little or nothing of what they may have been – Gibbon must establish his own, and there was a considerable historiography of which he must take account. Historians contemporary with this war were few and fragmentary, but there was a body of late antique writers from the centuries following it – Procopius for the east Romans, Jordanes for the Goths, Gregory of Tours for the Franks – and for the first time since La Bléterie, a set of eighteenth-century historians (one of them an actual contemporary) on whom Gibbon drew and who involved him in debates and deliberations belonging to his own time. It is probable that his visit to Paris in 1777 occasioned much of this involvement. We need to review their accounts of Attila's invasion of Gaul and the historical contexts in which they led him to see it: and his footnotes tell us what these were.

Gibbon owned the 1742 edition of the Abbé Dubos's *Histoire Critique de l'Etablissement de la Monarchie Française dans les Gaules*, a key text in the

¹³ It is possible that Gibbon might be charged with understating the role of Aspar and Ardaburius as generals on the Persian frontier and actors in the dynastic politics of Constantinople.

¹⁴ p. 323. ¹⁵ p. 324.

long controversy over the historic origins of France. Attila, and even Aetius, were marginal actors in this story,¹⁶ for the reason that the Hunnic invasion affected mainly the interactions between Roman and Visigothic power further south, but Gibbon's footnotes show that he was already becoming concerned with the history of the French monarchy. If this was Dubos's emphasis, the second historian to emerge at this point in the *Decline and Fall* was equally focused upon the Franks, but as authors not of the French monarchy so much as of the German empire. The Saxon councillor Johann Jakob Mascov¹⁷ was indeed inspired by the wish to provide a comprehensive history of all the Germanic peoples, from England to Prussia, who had challenged and then replaced the Roman empire and laid the foundations of medieval and modern Europe; but his governing theme in the two volumes translated into English was the grouping of all the German peoples under the sovereignty of the Franks and the establishment of the Carolingian empire from which all subsequent empires down to Charles V were derived.¹⁸ If Dubos was the historian of the Frankish monarchy, Mascov was the historian of the Frankish empire. The footnotes to chapter 35 of the *Decline and Fall* show Gibbon in search of the history of the post-Roman west he needed badly to understand but would never come to write.

If Gibbon thought that Dubos sometimes went too far in his concern with Frankish history – 'the ingenious author too often bewilders himself in system and conjecture'¹⁹ – the third of his modern sources exceeded him in suggestiveness if not reliability. The Comte du Buat – Louis-Gabriel, comte du Buat-Nançay (1732–89) – was that rarity in French history, a nobleman and man of letters who was also an expatriate. He early acquired diplomatic appointments at Ratisbon and Dresden, and spent much of his life in Germany.²⁰ His first treatise, *Les Origines, ou l'Ancien Gouvernement de la France, l'Italie et l'Allemagne*, was published in four volumes in 1757,²¹ but grew into his life's work, the twelve volumes of *L'Histoire Ancienne des Peuples de l'Europe*, published at Paris in 1772 with a preface by *les éditeurs* written in his absence.²² Gibbon owned both publications. From this preface and du Buat's own text, it can be seen that he aimed to be a

¹⁶ For Gibbon's further involvement in the debate, see below, ch. 22.

¹⁷ Mascov, 1738; Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1240. Gibbon spells it "Mascou."

¹⁸ Mascov, 1738, II, 'The Author's Preface', p. vi; 'The Translator's Preface', pp. xviii–xix.

¹⁹ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 324, n. 3.

²⁰ For the life of this little-studied figure, consult the *Biographie Universelle* (1854), VI, pp. 83–5. He is studied by Carcassonne, 1926?, pp. 244–60. The only recent treatment seems to be Smith 2005, ch. 5. My thanks to Robert Mankin, Catherine Volpilhac-Augier and Rolando Minuti for their help in pursuing this trail.

²¹ Owned but not cited by Gibbon; *Library*, p. 114. ²² Du Buat, 1772, I, pp. v–xviii.

historian of both barbarism and Europe. The peoples of the latter, the *éditeurs* proclaimed, were nearly all of the former descent, but the only written histories were the works of Greeks and Romans, who had recorded their own history in defence of 'la liberté inquiète et défensive chez les Grecs, et de la liberté fière et entreprenante chez les Romains'.²³ Du Buat, whose concept of liberty was *nobiliaire* yet grounded in folk-right, aimed to recover the history of the European peoples and trace it from its barbarian origins through its medieval expansion to the creation of modern Europe. But this could only be done by assembling the accounts of barbarian action given by the very Greek and Latin histories from which they had been excluded, and this entailed the huge task of erudition to which du Buat gave his life. It may be doubted how many of his twelve volumes Gibbon studied at length.²⁴ Half of them were devoted to the history of the peoples during the rise of Greece and Rome, half of them to the period of Roman decline and fall; and among the latter Gibbon made use chiefly of the seventh volume, which covers the lives of Aetius and Attila, and presents the Hunnish invasion of Gaul in 451 in the settings in which du Buat desired to display it.

The Count had his own grand narrative.

Je marche au milieu des ténèbres en écrivant l'histoire du cinquième siècle: on peut pourtant dire que ce siècle si négligé, si peu connu, a été le berceau de l'histoire moderne, et que les ténèbres couvrent l'origine de plusieurs royaumes aussi-bien que les dernières angoisses de l'empire expirant. Mais c'est-là précisément la raison pour laquelle nous avons si peu de monumens qui puissent nous guider sur l'histoire de ce temps-là. J'imiterai, dans la manière dont je vais la traiter, la méthode des navigateurs qui seignent dans une course incertaine sur des points fixes, auxquels ils rapportent tous leurs calculs.²⁵

[I journey through darkness in writing the history of the fifth century; nevertheless one may say that this century, so little studied and so little known, was the cradle of modern history, and that the darkness covers the origins of several kingdoms no less than the final agonies of a dying empire. But this is exactly the reason why we have so few memorials that might guide us through the history of that time. I shall imitate in the treatment I am about to give it the method of navigators, who guide themselves on an uncertain course by a number of fixed points on which they base all their calculations.]

²³ *Ibid.*, I, p. vii; cf. p. vii: 'l'Histoire Romaine, écrite par des Romains avec le projet d'en imposer, et par les Grecs dans le dessein de flater.' Both passages quoted are from the *préface des éditeurs* but plainly convey the author's thoughts and perhaps his language.

²⁴ Womersley, 1994, III, 2, 1201. In note 86 to chapter 30, Gibbon says that his 'laborious accuracy may sometimes fatigue a superficial reader', words that may be echoed by one who has been compelled to scan his works online.

²⁵ Du Buat, 1772, VII, pp. 264–5. This is perhaps as close as du Buat came to being a 'philosophical' historian in the sense in which we use the term.

But in a time of *Volkerwänderungen* the landmarks will frequently shift. Du Buat's chapter headings tell us that following the crossings of the Rhine in 406

le depart des Vandales [and with them the Suevi, Alans and Burgundians] laiss[a] un vuide dans les provinces voisins du Danube et dans la haute Germanie. Comment fait repli ce vuide et ... que les Francs remplacent les Vandales dans la grande Germanie.²⁶

[the departure of the Vandals ... left a vacuum in the Danubian provinces and upper Germany. How this vacuum was filled and the Franks replaced the Vandals in Germany at large.]

There are Frankish and Vandal histories that need to be related, but du Buat's mistrust of Dubos and the *thèse royale* makes him reluctant to say too much of the former, until others have received attention. The Vandals are another matter. Du Buat follows them through Gaul into Spain, and gives his own account of the affair of Aetius and Boniface and the Vandal crossing into Africa. The Vandals are not a European people, in the sense that they have left no descendant nation behind them; but du Buat arrives at the striking statement that 'la prise de Carthage par Genseric change le système de l'univers',²⁷ which stands beside Gibbon's judgement that the Vandal did at least as much as Alaric and Attila to bring about the western Fall. This sentence was indeed written some years before Gibbon read it, and may have helped shape his account of Genseric's achievement. It may, however, tell us more about du Buat's meaning to study the words he uses. 'L'univers' will have signified 'the known world', but this world is Roman, barbaric and European, and by 'système' we are to understand that there is some intelligible pattern of behaviour – necessarily of power politics – which determines the actions of Romans and barbarians and renders them intelligible to us. The seizure of Carthage by Genseric changed this pattern; the powerful must act differently, and historians must learn to understand new conditions governing their behaviour.

For Gibbon, as we have begun to see, the radical change was the Vandal control of the Roman corn supply and, in the near future, the rise of Vandal sea power, interrupting the attempts of the twin empires to act together. No doubt du Buat could see these consequences for himself, but his use of the term 'système' had another meaning. The editors of the *Histoire Ancienne*, who certainly wrote with knowledge of his mind and probably of his text, remark that among his intentions was that of proving that the great chiefs of the barbarian invaders

²⁶ Du Buat, 1772, VI, p. 220; the contents of ch. 10.

²⁷ Below, pp. 402, 405, 417, 422, 424–25.

ne sont point des bêtes féroces, dignes tout au plus qu'on leur accorde de l'instinct; ce sont de grands hommes, des hommes habiles, sages, prévoyans, que la nécessité maîtrise quelques fois, et qui à leur tour font naître les événemens et en profitent.²⁸

[They were not wild animals, to be studied only as acting by instinct; they were great men, men of ability, sagacious, far-seeing, sometimes overcome by necessity, and in their turn shaping events and profiting by them.]

They were in short capable of acting in history, performing the actions and displaying the virtues of which historians took account; not the irrational and childish savages which Greek and Roman histories confined them to being. It was du Buat's intention to write barbarian history into classical history, and show that barbarians were not necessarily subhuman; and to show them interacting with the politics of empire, even as they disrupted it, was a way of doing this. They thus became actors in a *système* of intelligible statecraft, and Genseric's achievement as perhaps the greatest of them was to change and transform that *système* by giving it new realities. To understand how he did this, however, it would be necessary to examine the *système* as it had been shaped in the years preceding the prise de Carthage; and Gibbon's contention was that it had been shaped by 'the administration of Aetius'.

The account he now gives of Aetius's years in power is closely entangled though by no means identical with that of du Buat, with which he often disagreed while coming close to depending on it. As his readers already know from the story of Boniface, he depicts 'the last of the Romans' as both the heroic figure of panegyric and as the practitioner of an unlimited duplicity which has made him the villain of a tragedy – du Buat exculpates him in the matter of the deceptive letters – and may illustrate for us how a Machiavellian prince might have behaved if called on to shore up the fragments of a disintegrating empire. Both Gibbon and du Buat show him obliged to form alliances with barbarians, but adroit enough to weaken them even as he relies on their power; a question perhaps not answered here is whether he enjoys sufficient power of his own. The narrative is to find a climax with his victory over Attila at Châlons in 451, but as we know already, his personal power at and after the death of Honorius had depended on a close alliance with tribes or factions among the Huns. It was an army of Huns he brought to support the usurper John and then dismissed in order to ingratiate himself with Placidia; a second force of Huns he brought to make war upon Boniface after his plots were exposed. Defeated by Boniface, he took refuge among 'his faithful Huns',²⁹ returning, at the head of a third force, to impose

²⁸ Du Buat, 1772, I, p. xv. ²⁹ Gibbon's words; above, p. 386.

himself on the administration of Placidia. Thereafter we find him in the heroic role of the empire's last saviour, operating mainly in southern Gaul and Spain among the various peoples established there since the catastrophe of 406–8. These include Goths – Visigoths as we may now call them – ruled by the heirs of Alaric with their capital at Toulouse, but extending their power south into Spain, where the departure of the Vandals into Africa has left the field open to further competition. One wonders whether the super-subtle Aetius connived at the Vandal departure, but du Buat's statement that the fall of Carthage produced a new world of power relations suggests a development beyond even his manipulative capacity. In 440 and again in 451 Genseric is an actor in the explosion of Hunnic power.

Aetius in Gaul, on the other hand – it is here that we read most about his 'administration' of the western empire – remains for some time reliant, if not dependent, on his alliances among the Huns. Hun and Alan auxiliaries or mercenaries control strategically important areas of Gaul for him, and characteristically

the patrician laboured to restrain, rather than to excite, their zeal and resentment against the Goths, the Burgundians, and the Franks.³⁰

It is to be the essence of his strategy that he seeks always to conciliate those he has defeated and distract those whom he has made his allies. 'Aetius and his Scythian cavalry'³¹ – the words suggest that the horse-archers of the steppe are still important – take part in the destruction of the invading Burgundians; and on another occasion Aetius 'at the head of his light cavalry' descends upon the wedding feast of a Frankish prince (there ensues mass rape of which Gibbon writes with a facetiousness we find unpleasing³²). This anecdote serves to introduce the kingdom of the Franks and its role in Attila's invasion; but before we reach either, Gibbon has had to recount the end of Aetius's alliance with Hunnic forces and a change in du Buat's *système de l'univers*.

As early as 439, the Visigothic king Theodoric, 'the son of the great Alaric',³³ is encouraged by the Burgundian invasion to besiege Narbonne. Aetius defeats him, but in the next campaigning season is 'summoned to Italy by some public or private interest' – Gibbon clearly does not know what it was – and his lieutenant Litorius, 'at the head of an army of Huns', attacks Toulouse, the Gothic capital, where he is defeated, captured and

³⁰ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 326. This is the first appearance in this text of the term 'patrician', used to designate a commander-in-chief, sometimes almost a viceroy, holding power in the western empire. It will recur to the end of the latter.

³¹ p. 327. ³² p. 332. ³³ p. 327.

humiliated. Aetius returns, and there is a face-off between his army and Theodoric's, which ends not in battle but in a quasi-alliance.³⁴ The patrician always prefers to manipulate his enemies, if necessary by making them his friends – never his equals. This is perhaps the highpoint of Aetius's re-consolidation – never a restoration – of the western empire; but it has consequences, and must be seen in contexts, which our two historians describe differently. Du Buat proceeds:

C'est-là tout ce que nous savons de plus intéressant touchant les événements de l'année 440. Mais l'année précédent avoit encore été funeste aux Romains par la perte de Carthage que Genseric avoit attaqué et prise lorsqu'on s'y attendoit le moins. Il passa aussi en Sicile cette même année; mais dès l'année suivante on vit arriver dans cette île une puissante armée que l'empereur Theodose envoyoit en Afrique pour reconquerir Carthage; elle n'alla cependant plus loin que la Sicile par la faute des chefs qui perdirent un tems précieux et donnerent celui d'attendre ou même de faire naître un événement qui le tirât d'embarras,

meaning Attila's attack on Margus and the devastation of the Danube frontier.

Mais suspendons nos réflexions sur cet événement qui appartient à l'histoire d'Orient; et observons que depuis la défaite de Lithorius on ne vit plus les Huns grossir les armées d'Aëtius, soit que ce général reconcilié avec les Goths ne désirât plus l'assistance de ces dangereux alliés, soit que les deux rois ne voulussent plus confier leur troupes à des généraux qui les auroient peut-être sacrifiés, soit enfin que la prise de Carthage par Genseric eût changé le système politique de l'univers. Cette dernière raison est peut-être la seule véritable; mais on pourrait croire aussi que depuis la traité de paix fait avec les Goths, Aëtius menagea beaucoup moins les Huns qu'il ne l'avoit fait jusqu'alors.³⁵

[That is all we know of much interest touching the events of the year 440. But the year before had already been fatal to the Romans by the loss of Carthage, which Genseric had attacked and taken when least expected. He also invaded Sicily in the same year; but in the next there arrived in the island a powerful army dispatched by the emperor Theodosius for the reconquest of Carthage; it got no further than Sicily through the fault of its commanders, who lost precious time and gave [Genseric] the opportunity to anticipate or perhaps bring about an event which would rescue him from any difficulty.

But let us suspend our reflections on this event, which belongs to the history of the East, and observe instead that after the defeat of Litorius we do not again see Huns forming the strength of the armies of Aetius: perhaps because this general, once reconciled with the Goths, had no further need of such dangerous allies; perhaps because the two kings³⁶ no longer wished to entrust their troops to generals who would perhaps have treated them as expendable; perhaps, finally,

³⁴ For the whole episode, pp. 327–8. ³⁵ Du Buat, 1772, VII, pp. 378–9.

³⁶ i.e., those of the Goths and the Huns. Is Attila specifically intended?

because the capture of Carthage by Genseric had altered the balance of world politics. This last is perhaps the true and sufficient cause; but one may also believe that after his treaty with the Goths, Aetius had much less control of his Huns than he had had previously.]

Neither du Buat nor Gibbon alludes directly to the possibility that as Attila made himself sole master of a Hunnic 'empire', he might discourage his subjects from serving under Aetius; but the latter's replacement of an informal alliance with Huns by a rivalry based on mutual understanding with Goths is a change in the *système de l'univers* which cannot be directly ascribed to the Vandal seizure of Carthage. Gibbon and du Buat agree that the latter was a transforming event, but do not see it identically. For Gibbon what matters is that it gave Genseric control over the African corn supply. For du Buat what matters is the *système* and the barbarians' roles in it, and the significance of Carthage is that it inaugurated a period in which east Roman forces were occasionally mobilised for the recovery of Sicily and Africa, and Genseric was able – we are never told just how – to incite Attila to invasions of the empire which forced abandonment of the enterprise. Invasions of Africa recur until the end of the western empire and after; but immediately we are concerned with the war of 440–1 and the devastation of the Danube frontier. Ten years later, at the accession of Marcian in the east, Attila commands a vast and highly mobile power which he can turn against either empire, and Gibbon and du Buat must consider the causes and consequences of his decision to invade Gaul – an action systemically different from the establishment of warlord power along the Danube. The historians agree on the facts but relate them differently.

Gibbon opens with a passage in praise of Theodoric king of the Visigoths very like that he will accord to Theodoric king of the Ostrogoths in Italy at the close of Volume III. It is drawn from a panegyric written by Sidonius Apollinaris, a Gallo-Roman aristocrat who like many of his class cohabited with Romanised barbarians. Gibbon says that Theodoric

appears to have deserved the love of his subjects, the confidence of his allies, and the esteem of mankind. His throne was surrounded by six valiant sons, who were educated with equal care in the exercises of the Barbarian camp, and in those of the Gallic schools; from the study of Roman jurisprudence they acquired the theory, at least, of law and justice; and the harmonious sense of Virgil contributed to soften the asperity of their native manners,³⁷

³⁷ Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 328–9. For Gibbon's praise of the Ostrogoth Theodoric, see below, p. 433.

but did not prevent them at their father's death from engaging in the fratricide which du Buat sees as 'toujours l'économie politique des Barbares'.³⁸ He is less disposed than Gibbon to admire the civilising effect of classical letters. Both historians go on to examine the Gothic involvement in the *système de l'univers* and the latter's apparent breakdown in the crisis of 450–1. It is the result of an action by Genseric at once barbarically brutal and uncharacteristically imprudent. He has a Gothic princess, sent as wife to one of his sons but for some reason distrusted,

punished by the amputation of her nose and ears; and the unhappy daughter of Theodoric was ignominiously returned to the court of Toulouse in that deformed and mutilated condition.³⁹

By the standards of any monarchy, especially a barbaric one, such an act was a challenge to immediate war, and one wonders what du Buat could have meant by *la politique* when writing

ce furent la cruauté et la politique de Genseric que firent éclore les vastes projets qu'Attila formast depuis longtems.⁴⁰

[It was both the cruelty and the policy of Genseric that brought into action the vast projects that Attila had long had in mind.]

We find ourselves invited to believe that Genseric provoked war with the Visigoths, that he had reason to fear a Gothic and perhaps Roman attack on his position in Africa, that he induced Attila to launch a diversionary campaign against Gaul, and that Attila acted in pursuit of ambitions already formed.⁴¹ None of this seems particularly convincing; it is not like Genseric as we have come to know him, and when we last heard of Attila and his ambitions, he was hesitating whether to unleash his forces in search of tribute from the eastern or the western empire. Gibbon, however, is willing to believe that Genseric had something to fear from the west.

The Imperial ministers, who always cherished the discord of the Barbarians, would have supplied the Goths with arms, and ships, and treasures, for the African war; and the cruelty of Genseric might have been fatal to himself if the artful Vandal had not armed, in his cause, the formidable power of the Huns. His rich gifts and pressing solicitations inflamed the ambition of Attila; and the designs of Aetius and Theodoric were prevented by the invasion of Gaul.⁴²

³⁸ Du Buat, 1772, VII, p. 252. ³⁹ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 329.

⁴⁰ Du Buat, 1772, VII, pp. 520–1.

⁴¹ The same account, derived from Priscus's history, was accepted by Montesquieu in chapter 19 of the *Consideration sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence*, ed. Weil and Courtney, 2000, p. 247; Lowenthal 1965, p. 180.

⁴² Womersley, 1994, II, p. 329.

Whatever we may think of this as a reading of the ambitions of the actors, or as a consequence of the fall of Carthage to the Vandals, Gibbon now goes on, as du Buat at this point does not, to reintroduce the Franks to his narrative, and make the growth of their kingdom on the lower Rhine a significant presence in the policies of Aetius and Attila. Here we have Gibbon drawing on the French historiography which du Buat does not wish to use. Drawing also on Mascov, he has the Franks under their king Clodion devastating Mainz, Trier and Cologne, and establishing a kingdom as far south as the Somme, which at Clodion's death is disputed between his sons. One of these, Meroveus, becomes the client of Valentinian and Aetius; the other places himself under the protection of Attila;

and the king of the Huns embraced an alliance which facilitated the passage of the Rhine, and justified by a specious and honourable pretence the invasion of Gaul.⁴³

This is all very well; the barbarian kings and their insecure Roman patrons are competing for territory and domination, and we are looking at du Buat's *système de l'univers*. The last time we studied the behaviour of Attila, however, he was no practitioner of interstate warfare, but a nomad chieftain on a huge scale, engaged in plunder, devastation and the exaction of tribute. His role in the Frankish succession must be explained by altering our perception of him, and supposing him – as du Buat does and Gibbon has begun to do – the supreme lord and chieftain of a federation of peoples, held together by his own personality and the force of mounted archers he has inherited from the steppe. We can well believe that he would not want to share power over Huns with Aetius. In the Roman, however, he encounters a rival captain, who has what is left of empire behind him, and is using his remarkable capacities in war, diplomacy and manipulation to maintain an imperial confederacy reaching down into Visigothic Spain and still controlling the Alpine provinces and Italy. The two confederacies can be imagined competing for control of the Frankish kingdom; what is harder to imagine is an Attila who is more than the lord of the steppes encountered by Maximin and Priscus on their embassy. As for Genseric, he does not seem to belong in this picture at all.

The historians – and perhaps Attila himself – are now in search of a *casus belli*: a set of grievances and motives which may justify his war in the west and render it intelligible. So far Gibbon has mentioned only his demand for tribute from both empires; but there have appeared both Genseric's supposed need of an ally and the opportunity afforded by the disputed Frankish succession. A third is now mentioned; Honoria, the delinquent

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 331–2.

sister of the emperor Valentinian, in disgrace over an unhallowed pregnancy, is said to have written to Attila offering herself and a third of her brother's empire. Nobody takes her seriously or even knows where she is,⁴⁴ but it is the sort of absurdity Attila likes using to humiliate emperors, and Gibbon recalls that the Tanju princes of the eastern Huns had demanded brides from the emperors of China. There are now three pretexts for war, and Gibbon remarks:

When Attila declared his resolution of supporting the cause of his allies the Vandals and the Franks, at the same time, and almost in the spirit of romantic chivalry, the savage monarch professed himself the lover and the champion of the princess Honoria.⁴⁵

To supply him with allies he might support, and with a capacity for chivalrous behaviour, is to make Attila something more than a savage, capable of the historically recognisable conduct du Buat was anxious to ascribe to the barbarian chiefs. The latter historian, whose presence may be detected in Gibbon's chapter, reviews the three motives suggested as sending Attila west, beginning with the Frankish succession. Of this he says that too much has been made of it by the Abbé Dubos's obsession with Frankish history and the *thèse royale*; it was absurd in that historian to suggest that Attila meant to settle the Huns in Gaul. As for Honoria, she could bring him claims only to territory in Italy and – says du Buat with justification – he never showed interest in acquiring Roman provinces.⁴⁶ There remains the war against the Visigoths which was plainly Attila's strategic objective, and the conclusion for these historians must be that he invaded Gaul principally as the ally of Genseric, pursuing both the law of nations and reason of state. Du Buat is trying to elevate Attila in the scale of civility.

Je ne prétends pas assurément que ce fût un prince scrupuleux; il n'avoit pas sur le droit de gens les lumieres que nous avons ... je conviendrois, si l'on veut, que la conduite d'Attila fut celle d'un barbare: encore faudra-t-il dire que la protection qu'il accorda à un prince Franc, et le danger qui menaçoit son allié Genseric, ne furent que le prétexte d'une guerre qu'il entreprit par un désir secret de s'enrichir ou de repandre le sang innocent. Mais en ce cas comment préféra-t-il cette guerre à celle qu'il pouvoit faire à l'empereur d'Orient, et qui avec moins de dangers et en moins de tems, lui auroit procuré, outre le butin et les prisonniers, un revenu annuel de deux mille cent livres d'or?⁴⁷

[I shall certainly not pretend that he was a scrupulous prince – he had not our knowledge of the law of nations ... I will concede if anyone wishes that Attila's

⁴⁴ p. 333: 'immured in a perpetual prison ... with some obscure and nominal husband'.

⁴⁵ pp. 332–3. ⁴⁶ Du Buat, 1772, VII, pp. 519–23. ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 526–7.

conduct was that of a barbarian. It may even be necessary to declare that the protection he offered to a Frankish prince, and the danger that threatened his ally Genseric, were merely the pretences for a war he undertook from a secret desire to enrich himself and spill innocent blood. But in that case how could he prefer such a war to that he could have made upon the emperor of the east, which with fewer dangers and in less time would have brought him, as well as plunder and captives, an annual tribute of two hundred thousand pounds of gold?]

Du Buat was asking a difficult question. If Attila was no more than a brigand on a huge scale, why did he extend his operations from the east, where he knew how to practise them, to the west, where the geography and the politics were different? Once he found himself on the Rhine and in Gaul, how did he come to abandon the border tactics of plunder and tribute, and engage in the ongoing wars of Franks and Visigoths, manipulated by the statecraft of Aetius, which had less to offer him and which we have yet to believe he understood? Gibbon tells us only that Attila mobilised his subject empire – if empire it can be called – and that

the kings and nations of Germany and Scythia, from the Volga perhaps to the Danube, obeyed the warlike summons of Attila,⁴⁸

thus making his campaign a migration of nations and a barbarian invasion of Europe, which we have been given no reason to suppose he either intended or understood. So much – must we add? – for du Buat's vision of Attila as a proto-European.

Attila's confederate armies – of whose composition and capacity the historians have so little to tell us – set out westward from the plains of modern Hungary, and then turn north following what used to be the empire's Rhine frontier. They cross the river near its junction with the Neckar, where they are joined by Franks of the faction under their protection, and storm and sack the cities of Coblenz, Trier and Metz. Here du Buat, to Gibbon's no small displeasure,⁴⁹ denies that Metz was destroyed by Attila, and goes so far as to speak of 'la modération de ce grand homme'.⁵⁰ Gibbon thinks he is making himself Attila's apologist, but the issue is larger still. Throughout his volumes, du Buat is the apologist of the barbarians, whom he thinks little less civilised than the Romans, and likes to depict as engaging in a statecraft, and following a practice of war, anticipatory of that of early modern Europe. Attila's turn north, then west, and as we will see in a moment south, raises, however, the further question of what kind of war he was conducting. This is no raid of Huns massively devastating a previously settled borderland; by crossing the Rhine into lower Germany they have entered a terrain determined by Roman

⁴⁸ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 334. ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 335, n. 35. ⁵⁰ Du Buat, 1772, VII, p. 544.

relations with the Frankish kingdom, and when they cross the Somme and the Seine and move south towards Orleans, they become actors in the politics of Aetius and Theodoric, which have become crucial to the western empire, since Aetius's loss of Hun support has obliged him to rely on the management of his delicate relationship with the Visigothic kingdom. It now becomes possible, and may be not without foundation, to regard Attila's western war as a grand strategy of bringing Gaul under the control of a Hun-dominated confederacy of peoples from the *barbaricum*, replacing the confederacy Aetius is seeking to build under Roman control in the western *imperium*. To say that Attila may not have imagined anything on that scale is not to say that he might not have found himself doing it. The question is whether, and how far, our historians are telling such a story. Whatever the answer, they have travelled some distance from Attila's intervention as the ally of Genseric in distant Carthage, though they are not far from letting this stand as his motive.

The narrative is resumed as that of the actions of Aetius. Following the end of his alliances with Huns, the death of Placidia weakens his position at Ravenna. He crosses the Alps into Gaul 'at the head of some troops whose strength and number scarcely deserves the name of an army', says Gibbon, and du Buat insists that this remains his predicament throughout the subsequent campaign.⁵¹ His only hope lies in the Visigothic alliance, and he now hears that Theodoric has decided to await the Huns on his own territory (it is assumed that Attila's ambitions are without limit). Aetius sends the senator Avitus on an urgent mission to Toulouse, and Gibbon gives us the rhetoric he employs to persuade the Goths to adopt a forward strategy. (Gibbon complains here that we know of this only through a panegyric written by Sidonius Apollinaris, who would have done better to write a history.)⁵² Theodoric is persuaded, and sets out with Aetius to relieve Orleans from the siege engines of the Huns – if that is how we should designate the multi-national army of Attila. Aetius meanwhile has been enlarging his ragtag army by enlisting

several tribes or nations that seemed to fluctuate between the Huns and the Romans. The indefatigable diligence of the patrician gradually collected the troops of Gaul and Germany, who had formerly acknowledged themselves the subjects or soldiers of the republic, but now claimed the rewards of voluntary service and the rank of independent allies . . . Such was the various army which, under the conduct of Aetius and Theodoric, advanced by rapid marches to relieve Orleans, and to give battle to the innumerable host of Attila.⁵³

⁵¹ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 336; Du Buat, 1772, VII, p. 540.

⁵² Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 334, 336–7. ⁵³ p. 337.

Aetius is the last of the Romans; but the last of the Roman battles, of which we are about to read the classic narrative, is not a battle between empires, or between an empire and its barbarians, but between two confederacies of barbarians, of which one is under what is left of imperial control and the other held together by means of which we know very little. It follows that Aetius is at least as much concerned to manage his army – and more importantly, his ally – and to keep them from pursuing goals incompatible with his policies, as he is to lead them to victory in the field. Clausewitz would have understood this; it would be no surprise to learn that he did. Du Buat, however, the apologist of the barbarians, gives a more ‘Machiavellian’ account of Aetius’s policies.

Il paroît que le projet d’Aëtius, qui étoit d’affaiblir les Barbares par les Barbares, et sur-tout de se mettre en état de détruire ensuite les Goths avec ses seules forces⁵⁴

would have been frustrated by the Gothic proposal to remain on the defensive.

Rien n’étoit plus méprisable que l’armée de ce patrice; à peine pouvoir on lui donner ce nom; mais rien ne fut plus vif et mieux concerté que les mesures qu’il prit pour mettre les Goths aux prises avec les Huns. Ceux des Francs qui avoient un ennemi dans l’armée d’Attila se joignirent encore à lui.⁵⁵

[It seems that the plan of Aetius [was] to weaken barbarians by means of barbarians, and above all to place himself in a position to destroy the Goths with his own forces later . . . Nothing could be more contemptible than the army led by this patrician; one can scarcely give it that name; but nothing was more effective or better conducted than the steps he took to embroil the Goths with the Huns. Those Franks who had enemies in Attila’s army remained with him.]

This for du Buat explains how he was able to assemble his motley army, and why Attila could have had no reason to destroy the cities of the Frankish kingdom. The enigma – the mystery of state – of Aetius’s conduct is that from the time of his loss of Hun support, he is constantly building alliances against the Huns with one hand while weakening those alliances with the other. Du Buat presses this reading to an extreme;⁵⁶ but Gibbon, unable to explain Attila’s invasion of Gaul otherwise than by his alliance with Genseric, is not far behind him.

(III)

There occurs at this point a divergence between our two historians, disastrous for one though informative regarding both. Du Buat,

⁵⁴ Du Buat, 1772, VII, p. 538. ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 540. ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 537.

apparently confusing an apocryphal with an authentic text of one of the chronicles of the time, divides the battle which ends the Hun invasion into two: one at Orleans where Attila is victorious, the city captured and Theodoric slain, the other in Champagne, where Attila is defeated by the Visigothic nation in arms to avenge their king. Gibbon gives the received account: when Attila sees the Romans and Visigoths joined to relieve Orleans, he decides he is too far advanced to risk battle and retreats to the Marne, where he gives battle at Châlons or in the surrounding terrain of 'the Catalaunian fields'. Both however, tell much the same tale of what happened there, and of the conduct of Aetius in particular. As the last battle in Roman history, this receives epic treatment; the peoples fighting on either side are reviewed in the Homeric manner, and it is a battle of the nations in the barbaric sense, equivalent to that the nations of civilised Europe were to fight against Napoleon at Leipzig twenty years after Gibbon's death – a parallel which did not escape the Victorian Sir Edward Creasy, writing his *Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World* in 1857.⁵⁷ For Gibbon, however, it came at a low point in the history and historiography of war.

The discipline and tactics of the Greeks and Romans form an interesting part of their national manners. The attentive study of the military operations of Xenophon, or Caesar, or Frederic –

the Enlightened prince who was a master of the battlefield –

when they are described by the same genius which conceived and executed them, may tend to improve (if such improvement can be wished) the art of destroying the human species. But the battle of Châlons can only excite our curiosity by the magnitude of the object; since it was decided by the blind impetuosity of barbarians, and has been related by partial writers, whose civil or ecclesiastical profession secluded them from the knowledge of military affairs.⁵⁸

But if the age of the legions was over, and with it the age of their historians (Gibbon probably did not know that du Buat had been a pupil of the Chevalier Folard,⁵⁹ an authority on Polybius) there remains a question in late antique military history to which he might have given attention. The devastating Hun impact upon Goths and Romans had been the effect of the archery of steppe horsemen; they had learned the art of siege warfare and had practised it at Orleans; but was Châlons the climax or the failure of the tactics of the steppe as they made their way across Europe? The historians do not enable us to answer the question.

⁵⁷ Creasy, 1883, n. 148. ⁵⁸ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 340.

⁵⁹ *Biographie Universelle*; Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1217.

After telling us that it was a soldiers' battle in which the casualty figures are too enormous to be altogether discounted, Gibbon continues:

After the mutual and repeated discharge of missile weapons, in which the archers of Scythia might signalize their superior dexterity, the cavalry and infantry of the two armies were furiously mingled in closer combat.⁶⁰

King Theodoric is killed by a javelin; but the battle appears a collision between massed forces of Huns (or their allies?) and Visigoths, contending to command the high ground, until the latter's reserve, commanded by their prince Torismond, move forward to encircle the central *mêlée*. The Huns are worsted and forced to withdraw within a circle of wagons – a steppe tactic of which they have not recently had much need. Attila meditates mass suicide, but the true history of the battle now begins. The Visigoths are in nearly as great a disorder, and Aetius elsewhere on the field does not know where Torismond is to be found. He succeeds in making contact, but the advice he gives is that of a politician rather than a general. Conformably with his conduct at every point in the histories, he urges Torismond to withdraw from the battle – apparently immediately – and return to Toulouse, where his father's death will already have led to the struggle for succession.⁶¹ The advice is good – we learn at a later point that Torismond has been murdered by his brother, another Theodoric⁶² – but Aetius's motives are already familiar.

[T]he mature policy of Aetius was apprehensive that after the extirpation of the Huns –

on whom he had so long relied if not depended –

the republic would be oppressed by the pride and power of the Gothic nation.⁶³

Words prophetic enough, as Gibbon obviously knew; but the battle of Châlons is ending in a way not immediately decisive. Aetius is credited by some historians with giving the same advice to Meroveus the Frank, and even (absurdly but significantly) to Attila himself.⁶⁴ The Hun remains for several days

within the circle of his wagons, and his retreat beyond the Rhine confessed the last victory which was achieved in the name of the Western empire.⁶⁵

In its name, but not by its forces; we are left asking what power base of his own Aetius commands; and it would be fair to ask to what kind of

⁶⁰ Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1217. 'Might', as usual with Gibbon, signifies conjecture.

⁶¹ Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 340–1. ⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 364. ⁶³ p. 342. ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, n. 46.

⁶⁵ pp. 342–3.

defeat the retreat of Attila amounted. The supposed alliance with Genseric has lost whatever explanatory value it possessed, and we seem to have been reading the story of how Attila tried and failed to lead a confederation of Hun-dominated Germanic nations against a temporary alliance of Romans and Visigoths, in a war to which the Franks were not fully committed. In this adventure Attila departs from his role as a frontier warlord whose power is a means to the demand for tribute, and in his intervention in the politics of the western empire he may be out of his depth. Thus Gibbon's narrative, and thus du Buat's apology; it is no surprise to find that Attila's last campaign is a reversion to type. Gibbon's rhetoric indeed presents him as barbaric titan to the end of his life; but rhetoric and narrative may tell different stories, as Gibbon well knew.

In the following year, 452, Attila invades Italy, still using Honoria's name, of so little use to him in Gaul. Here we find him behaving in a familiar role, demanding tribute and destroying cities, and imposing his devastations on the western empire as he had failed to do in the previous year. He takes and annihilates Aquileia, the guardian fortress of the Alpine route into Italy; Gibbon predictably reminds us at some length that refugees from this ancient frontier city began the foundation of Venice, the paragon of modern commercial republics.⁶⁶ The Huns, behaving like Huns, rush on westward, destroying the cities of the Lombard plain as far as Milan and Pavia. They are in fact continuing the strategy practised on the eastern empire, extending the debatable land of the Danube along the valley of the Po; this is what they know how to do, and does not involve them in the deceptive politics of Gaul. Aetius does not encourage the Goths to march against them, though he seems to have sent light troops to harass their communications;⁶⁷ and Marcian in the east is credited by some writers with launching an invasion of Pannonia that threatens their homelands north of the Danube. Here is told the story of how a Hunnic raid on Rome itself was bought off by an embassy in which the pope, Leo 'the Great', took part. Gibbon mentions this tale with benign scepticism;⁶⁸ it is worth noting that Leo is the first pope who appears in the *Decline and Fall* as prefiguring the grandeur of Christian Rome in the centuries to come. 'The ecclesiastical history of his long and busy pontificate' displays

the successful zeal with which he laboured to establish his opinions and his authority, under the venerable names of orthodox faith and ecclesiastical discipline,⁶⁹

⁶⁶ pp. 345–7. ⁶⁷ p. 347. ⁶⁸ pp. 348–9. ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, and n. 61.

words of a resonance already familiar; but Leo is the protector of his city at least in legend. Disease does more than prayer or miracle to account for Attila's retreat from Italy, threatening to return the following year to demand Honoria's bride-price; but he is surprised by death in circumstances at once barbaric, erotic and melodramatic. He ends as he began, a bandit chief on a continental scale; only the tangled tale of Genseric's diplomacy and Aetius's manipulations makes him an actor in the processes of Roman-barbarian interaction we call the Decline and Fall.

Du Buat's farewell to Attila presents him in that narrative as the historian sees it.

Ainsi fut rendu à la terre ce prince fameux qu'on ne s'est jamais laissé de maudire, parce qu'il entra avec cinq cens mille hommes dans les Gaules, où César fit périr ou réduisit en esclavage trois millions d'hommes, sans qu'on ait pensé pour cela à l'appeller le fléau du gerre humain; tant nous se tenons aux préjugés de l'enfance, et nous sommes aveuglés par cette admiration imbécille qu'on nous inspire pour ces Romains qui ont opprimé nos ancêtres!

Je ne ferai point l'éloge d'Attila; son histoire mieux connue le justifie assez de la férocité qu'on lui a reprochée; et le peu que nous savons de l'intérieur de ses états n'a pas besoin d'être développé par mes réflexions, pour prouver que son empire ne fut point une horde de Tartares errans, sans arts, sans mœurs et sans loix.

*Fin du Tome septième*⁷⁰

[Thus was returned to the earth this famous prince, whom we have never ceased to denounce because he entered Gaul with five hundred thousand men, where Caesar slaughtered or enslaved three million without ever being termed the scourge of the human race; so much do we cling to the prejudices of childhood and are blinded by that idiot admiration we are taught for the Romans who oppressed our ancestors!]

I will not pronounce an elegy for Attila; his history, properly understood, clears him of the ferocity with which he is charged; and the little we know of the government of his dominions need not be developed by my commentary, in order to prove that his empire was no horde of wandering Tartars, without arts, manners or laws. *End of the seventh volume.*]

Du Buat's *nobiliaire* philo-barbarism was harder than he thought to detach from its Latin roots. In the *sommaire* that opens his eighth volume, he seems to offer a history of the last emperors in the west, reflections on the fall of their empire, and its impact on the empire of the east.⁷¹ These are in fact not forthcoming, and it may be that this list of contents is the work of his editors; but in opening the eighth book itself, he informs us that we are about to read how an empire of soldiers who had destroyed their subjects' capacity to feed or supply them was destroyed by new and

⁷⁰ Du Buat, 1772, VII, p. 599. ⁷¹ Du Buat, 1772, VIII, pp. 1–2.

vital peoples of whom every soldier was a *citoyen*.⁷² Of just what polity or republic the barbarian warrior was a citizen we are not told, and Gibbon must have read these pages with derision; the fierce giants of the north lived by prowess, not civility; but du Buat in the same pages insisted on something else. The disruption of Attila's Hun-dominated confederacy – de Guignes, whom both historians knew, insisted that it was not an empire⁷³ – released the energies of a plurality of peoples, to create along the frontiers of both Roman empires a diversity of problems with which neither Ravenna nor Constantinople could deal.

Gibbon proceeds to relate the breakup of Attila's dominions under his sons, and the disappearance of the Huns from Europe.

Two modern historians have thrown much new light on the ruin and division of the empire of Attila – M. de Buat, by his laborious and minute diligence . . . and M. de Guignes, by his extraordinary knowledge of the Chinese language and writers.⁷⁴

The contrast is between erudition and the history of society. Du Buat had set himself the obsessive and superhuman task of tracing every people, other than the Greeks or Romans, who appeared in the literature of Europe. He carried this pursuit down to Charlemagne's destruction of the Avars and the appearance of the Magyars in German history. Gibbon was to arrive at both events and see in them the recurrent impact of the steppe upon Europe: but in chapter 35 of the *Decline and Fall*, de Guignes was able to show him the Huns vanishing into the plains from which they had come, absorbed by the 'Geougen' or Jurchen from whom the Avars were descended, before these were superseded on the steppe by the 'Igors' or Uighurs.⁷⁵ De Guignes restored the grand pattern of Eurasian history; but the end of the western empire was to be a history of fragmentation. The breakup of Attila's dominion was followed by the breakup of 'the administration of Aetius'.

⁷² pp. 2–3. ⁷³ De Guignes, 1756, II, p. 315.

⁷⁴ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 352, n. 71. 'De' for 'du' is Gibbon's spelling. ⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

(I)

Chapter 36 brings Gibbon to the effective terminus – some would say the *fons et origo* – of ‘the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire’ as he conceived it, and as it has been and continues to be conceived by the western and Latin-dominated cultures for which and in which he wrote and has been read. It arrives at the moment *c.*476 when there ceased to be even a nominal Augustus as emperor in the provinces west of Illyricum, and both nominal and effective power were exercised by the adventurer-rulers of a set of kingdoms in the former provinces (as they now were) of Italy, Africa, Gaul and Spain – Britain being consigned to outer oceanic darkness. These rulers continued to acknowledge the authority of the emperor at Constantinople, and even sometimes to depict themselves as his lieutenants; and from this has arisen both the historiographical problem of whether the empire ‘fell’ or was ‘transformed’, and – especially in the case of the kingdom of France – the perennial problem, both jurisdictional and historiographical, of how far the authority of kings was originally Roman and imperial or barbaric and feudal-constitutional. Of both these problems Gibbon was aware, and since he treated their histories, he wrote of them as open debates, rather than as arguments to which he must announce his conclusions. They are present, if only marginally so, in the final chapters of his third volume, and help explain why he carried those chapters past the climax of the year 476.

Nevertheless, the peaceable deposition of Romulus Augustulus – for which eastern approval was asked and given – marked for Gibbon, and has continued to mark, a turning point in world history; the more so when that history has been conceived in western terms. It indicated the end of Roman empire in the west – there being no longer a coherent structure seeking to exercise *imperium* in both east and west – and was held to signalise a replacement of Roman civility, as well as empire, by ruling cultures termed ‘barbarian’. There was a rhetoric, both late antique and humanist, which presented the image of a storm of invading barbarians

carrying out something like a conquest of the west Roman world, and we cannot use the words 'decline and fall' without that image coming, at least shadowily, into our minds; nor does it lack substance. It has never been possible, however, to deny that the 'barbarians' were not a conquering culture, but sought entry to, and then found themselves dominating, a world still both Roman and Christian, which changed them as they changed it. Gibbon began relating this process in volume II of the *Decline and Fall* and carried volume III past 476 before he could break off writing it. It was a living issue in his own times.

It was to be a western and a Latin process, already well known to the historiographical culture to which Gibbon belonged, and he had already begun to face the problem which was to dominate his later volumes: that of whether any way existed of writing a modern history – Byzantine in particular – that was not a history of Latin-centred church, politics and culture. Decline and Fall itself had become a western history, a process of disintegration in the western empire not duplicated in the eastern; and he had already announced the decision – perhaps fatal to the coherence of his work as a whole – to postpone the history of the eastern empire until he had completed that of the western disintegration. It would prove, however, that the latter history must be narrated as turning in part upon the failure of successive eastern attempts to intervene effectively in the politics of the western empire.

By the end of chapter 35, Gibbon had arrived at the point from which the failure of the western succession could be related in the succeeding chapter. He announced it in a subheading which reads: 'the deaths of Attila, Aetius and Valentinian III'. Each death was to be a moment from which the competition for power in the western empire was increasingly to be a history of impotence; no aspirant to rule possessed enough power to control the situation and the pursuit of the purple was in the end simply given up. The death of Attila marked the disintegration of Hun dominance in the German *barbaricum* and the struggle for power among the peoples thus set free was too chaotic to be controlled from within the Roman frontiers. Aetius had been able to manage the competition between Huns and Visigoths, while lacking – so Gibbon and du Buat had thought – effective military power of his own. With the disappearance of Attila he lost the claim to be the necessary opponent of a major external threat, and the jealousy between him as patrician and Valentinian as emperor boiled to a height familiar to readers of late imperial history. It culminated in the unlikely murder of Aetius by the hand of Valentinian himself – Aetius probably being too astonished to respond quickly enough – and the subsequent murder of Valentinian by two of the patrician's guardsmen, pursuing barbaric vengeance with the encouragement

of an ambitious Roman senator. Petronius Maximus is also depicted as avenging the rape of his wife. Gibbon pauses to remark that she remained chaste if she resisted, unchaste if she did not, and to ask whether her wrongs justified the extinction of the dynasty and the strife that must follow it.¹ He could have remembered that the High Anglican William Howel had made the same points in asking whether the rape of Lucretia justified the expulsion of the kings from ancestral Rome;² a comment more Tory than philosophical.

The immediate point, however, is the self-assertion of the senate, at this last instant of its history. The senators do not possess the military strength necessary to the exercise of power; and as Valentinian's murder of Aetius has removed the last patrician exercising it in more than one province, so the killing of Valentinian seems to have opened the competition for the purple to a crowd of minor actors, none strong enough to last. It is a long time since the deaths of Valens, Jovian or Julian, when the imperial succession was capable of filling a sudden gap. There are now only the various forces, all semi-barbarian, whom no Aetius is now at hand to manage. Even he, we were told, had no army of his own, and the central problem is that there is no army directly commanded by the state. The long-term history of Decline is the history of how this came about.

(II)

It might seem, then, that armed gangs of barbarian mercenaries will be seen squabbling over a purple for sale, like praetorians and legions three centuries before; but a stronger actor is about to re-enter the scene. Chapter 36 opens with the weakening of the structure of empire, not merely the succession to it, and reintroduces the Vandals.

The loss or desolation of the provinces from the Ocean to the Alps impaired the glory and greatness of Rome; her internal prosperity was irretrievably destroyed by the separation of Africa. The rapacious Vandals confiscated the patrimonial estates of the senators, and interrupted the regular subsidies which relieved the poverty and encouraged the idleness of the plebeians. The distress of the Romans was soon aggravated by an unexpected attack; and the province, so long cultivated for their use by industrious and obedient subjects, was armed against them by an ambitious Barbarian.³

This enlarges du Buat's *changement dans la système de l'univers*. Gibbon sees that the African corn supply is the key to Italy and empire, but does not quite tell us, as we might expect him to, that its interruption is the key

¹ Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 358–9. ² Howel, 1680, I, pp. 151–2, 399–431.

³ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 357.

to the decline of city as well as empire, which is where his Capitoline insight began. His eye is always on Genseric as the greatest and most lethal of the barbarian invaders.

The discovery and conquest of the Black nations, that might dwell beneath the torrid zone, could not tempt the rational ambition of Genseric; but he cast his eyes towards the sea; he resolved to create a naval power, and his bold resolution was executed with steady and active perseverance.⁴

It remains to be seen what he intended to do with this power: to intervene in the politics of disintegrating empire, or to establish a kingdom independent of it? Gibbon here invokes Genseric's supposed alliance with Attila, to emphasise the latter reading, but the failure of the succession opens up the former possibility. A few months after the murder of Valentinian and the election of Petronius Maximus as emperor, a Vandal fleet anchors at the mouth of the Tiber. Maximus is killed by a mob; Pope Leo intervenes to less effect than before; and the Vandals carry out a sack of Rome compared with which Alaric's is as nothing.⁵ So far Genseric is a pirate; he carries away a mass of loot and a crowd of hostages to be ransomed; but among these is Eudoxia, the widow of Valentinian, and her daughters,⁶ one of whom – we learn many pages later – Genseric marries to his son as a means to the demand for tribute.⁷ Does this annexation of what remains of the Theodosian dynasty mean that Genseric thinks of intruding himself on the politics of the twin empires, or is he merely a maritime Attila, establishing a predatory kingdom on the borders of both? Gibbon does not tell us, but he has reminded us how the Vandal state threatened the links between east and west. The disintegration of empire is more than a series of wars of succession; but these continue.

Genseric shows no interest in replacing Maximus, who before his death has appointed as *magister militum* in Gaul and Spain the senator Avitus who was Aetius's envoy to the Visigoth Theodoric at the time of the Hunnish invasion. The system of Aetius is carried on; the Romans and Visigoths are allied in the farther west; and on hearing of Maximus's death Theodoric II supports Avitus in the not irresponsible act of declaring himself emperor. He

accepted the Imperial diadem from the representatives of Gaul;⁸ and his election was ratified by the acclamations of the Barbarians and provincials. The formal consent of Marcian, emperor of the East, was solicited and obtained; but the

⁴ *Ibid.* ⁵ pp. 359–61. ⁶ p. 362. ⁷ p. 397.

⁸ i.e. the councillors of the confederation set up by Honorius; above, pp. 369–70.

senate, Rome, and Italy, though humbled by their recent calamities, submitted with a secret murmur to the presumption of the Gothic usurper.⁹

Avitus is the surviving representative of the Aetian interest, and Gibbon quotes Sidonius Apollinaris in giving an ideal portrait of Theodoric as a fully Romanised member of the provincial governing class;¹⁰ a portrait very like that of the Ostrogoth Theodoric as king of Italy which will follow in a later volume. Theodoric the Visigoth employs the support of Avitus and the name of Rome in enlarging his Spanish kingdom by the conquest of the Suevi, but does not in turn support Avitus in extending his power to Italy, an enterprise begun and ended before the Spanish war is concluded. Avitus encounters a fatal opposition from both the Roman senate and the two *magistri militum* in Italy: the Roman¹¹ Majorian and the barbarian-descended Ricimer, who will play a leading part in the failure of the western succession. Himself ineligible as emperor, Ricimer aspires to the role of patrician, and returning from a victory, rather significantly over a fleet of Vandals,¹² supports the election of Majorian. Of him Gibbon gives another ideal portrait, the last he will give of a Roman emperor,¹³ crediting him with personal amiability, republican virtue – he ‘revived the ancient language of law and liberty, which Trajan would not have disclaimed’¹⁴ – and reforming intentions, which remind us what Gibbon considered the fundamental evils that undermined the later empire. He issues edicts cancelling all payments in arrears to the state, reforming the tyranny and corruption of the tax-gatherers, and recalling the *curiales* and *decuriones* – ‘the lesser senate (so antiquity has justly styled them)’¹⁵ – to their functions by relieving them of personal accountability for the revenues they are to collect. We have heard of these abuses and their intended remedies many times since the days of Diocletian, and Gibbon is crediting Majorian with no more than he previously credited to Julian and Honorius. Perhaps these edicts are to be taken no more seriously than Synesius’s oration *De Regno*, but if the reforms are unreal the abuses are not. The emperor also imposes penalties on the dilapidation of ancient buildings – a starting point for Gibbon’s imagination of the Decline and Fall – which have been neglected by ‘the diminished crowds of the Romans’¹⁶ (is Gibbon recognising the impact of the Vandal control of the African corn supply?) and attempts to raise the birth-rate by forbidding vows of virginity by women under forty.¹⁷ In a footnote Gibbon remarks:

⁹ p. 364. ¹⁰ pp. 364–6.

¹¹ He is of a military family on ‘the Illyrian frontier’ (p. 370). ¹² p. 369.

¹³ pp. 370–5. ¹⁴ p. 372. ¹⁵ p. 373. ¹⁶ p. 374. ¹⁷ p. 375.

If I prosecute this History, I shall not be unmindful of the decline and fall of the *city* of Rome – an interesting object, to which my plan was originally confined.¹⁸

The edicts ascribed to Majorian may show us an emperor acting in a world now unreal, but they tell us what the Decline and Fall has become in Gibbon's mind.

(III)

Majorian is more than a figure in the succession of increasingly powerless emperors as Decline runs downhill towards Fall. He is an actor in the complex politics of the *système de l'univers*: the interactions between barbarian principalities and empire in east as well as west. Following the elimination of Avitus and the enlargement of Visigoth power, he resolves a strategy on an imperial scale, intended to renew the system of Aetius. Gibbon utters the familiar warning.

If the intrepid emperor could have infused his own spirit into the youth of Italy; if he could have revived in the field of Mars the manly exercises in which he had always surpassed his equals; he might have marched against Genseric at the head of a *Roman* army.¹⁹

But there are now no Romans to be found, out of whom to form an army of one another's equals, and Majorian must rely on footloose barbarian auxiliaries like any other emperor. The Huns have disappeared, but he is able to recruit a motley host of

the nations of the Danube, the Borysthenes, and perhaps of the Tanais. Many thousands of the bravest subjects of Attila, the Gepidae, the Ostrogoths, the Rugians, the Burgundians, the Suevi, the Alani,

are attracted from Pannonia and the lands around the upper Danube, the *officina militum* of the empire's last years, 'assembled in the plains of Liguria', and led by Majorian in person across the western Alps into Gaul.²⁰ He wins a victory over the Visigoths and brings them into a subordinate alliance – the Aetian strategy repeated – which now includes the extended kingdom of Theodoric in Spain. There now appears the objective of his strategy: the defeat of Vandal piracy and even 'the conquest of Africa',²¹ which alone can bring the twin empires into effective partnership. There is no suggestion by Gibbon of a joint east–west operation against Genseric in Carthage, and we are aware that Majorian is far from Italy, where effective power is in the hands of his colleague

¹⁸ p. 374, n. 43. Gibbon's emphasis. ¹⁹ p. 376; Gibbon's emphasis. ²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ p. 377.

Ricimer, a patrician who cannot be an emperor. He is no restorer of the empire of the west, and when Majorian's plans are revealed in detail to Genseric, suspicions arise which Gibbon in two footnotes seems to countenance.²² Since Attila's death, Genseric has no landward ally, but he is as ever capable of intrigue among the bands of mercenaries formerly subjects of the Huns. Relying on his own power, however, he attacks and destroys the fleet of transports Majorian has assembled in the harbour of Cartagena, and when, after a treaty which he considers no more than a truce, Majorian returns to Italy – where are his trans-Danubian mercenaries? – he finds all power turned against him. He is forced to abdicate and predictably dies a few days later, as does any prospect of a Roman–Visigothic combination against Vandal Africa.²³

Gibbon sees Majorian's death as the work of Ricimer, his former colleague in command of the armies in Italy, but is not quite sure of the latter's motives, unless these are reduced to a determination to keep control of Italy no matter what becomes of the provinces associated with it. This is to narrow our horizon to a point where – as Gibbon remarks later – the empire of the west has become no more than a kingdom of Italy,²⁴ and the succession of Caesars no more than an increasingly petty struggle to keep control of Rome. Gaul, Spain and Africa are becoming independent kingdoms, and there will come a moment when Italy does the same; but we are not there yet. Ricimer, who cannot be an emperor, sets up a puppet, Libius Severus, who reigns for six years without performing any action historians have troubled to record; but two regional warlords break away and continue the *système* of power relations. These are Marcellinus, first in Sicily and then in Epirus, where he has contacts with the eastern emperor; and Aegidius in northern Gaul beyond Visigothic reach, where he acts in the early history of the Frankish kingdom.²⁵ This is to take us away from Decline and Fall; or is the vision of Roman–barbarian alliances continuing the life of empire not yet wholly invalid?

The major player in the game of power continues to be Genseric. He possesses what is less a navy than a massive armament of pirate ships: brethren of the coast too lawless to be his subjects, but of whom he manages to be the chief in yearly forays against the coasts of the Mediterranean from Spain to Greece.²⁶ (Is Gibbon thinking of the Algerian corsairs of his own time?) Here he might seem no more than the maritime Attila envisaged earlier; but he pursues the demand for

²² pp. 378–9, nn. 53, 54. ²³ *Ibid.* ²⁴ p. 381; also 379–80.

²⁵ p. 380 for both generals. For Aegidius, see below, pp. 429, 460. Marcellinus 'still adhered to the old religion'.

²⁶ pp. 381–2.

tribute with a different kind of sophistication. He is able to use his possession of the widow and daughters of Valentinian in negotiations that may place his sons in line for the imperial succession, and lead more immediately to a treaty offering to spare the eastern empire's coastlands from the depredations of his corsairs. There is clearly no actual alliance between Carthage and Constantinople; but the treaty between the two has the effect of isolating Ricimer and his puppet, who are less able to protect their coasts.

The haughty Ricimer, who had long struggled with the difficulties of his situation, was at length reduced to address the throne of Constantinople in the humble language of a subject; and Italy submitted, as the price and security of the alliance, to accept a master from the choice of the emperor of the East.²⁷

Here is another major change in the *système de l'univers*. The eastern empire has intervened in the western succession before, but is now doing so because that succession has actually failed. Gibbon is therefore obliged, against his authorial strategy, to consider the east as part of a *système* and as a *système* in its own right. At about the time when Libius Severus has ceased to be useful to Ricimer and has disappeared from a history in which he can hardly be said to have appeared, we are introduced to a Constantinople where the emperor Marcian has been succeeded by a certain Leo, like him a middle-rank officer promoted to the throne by a powerful military household, that of Aspar who, like his father before and his son after him, has 'successively commanded the armies of the East'.²⁸ We should like to know whether these words imply the armies of the eastern empire in general, or those specifically of its eastern frontier, where the presence of the Persians obliged the armies to observe military and political discipline. Gibbon merely says – it is one of several occasions where we wish he had said more –

It is not the purpose of the present chapter, or even of the present volume, to continue the distinct series of the Byzantine history; but a concise view of the reign and character of the emperor Leo may explain the last efforts that were attempted to save the falling empire of the West.²⁹

Such an explanation would begin with a recognition that Aspar is not a Ricimer; his powerful military family will not conduct civil war against its rivals, and when his nominee Leo indicates that now he is emperor he is no longer a servant of the house, Aspar is obliged to submit. We have before us an empire that is not falling apart.

²⁷ pp. 382–3. Gibbon inclines to suspect a hidden understanding between Marcian and Genseric.

²⁸ pp. 383–4. ²⁹ p. 383.

The measures of peace and war were affected by this internal revolution. As long as Aspar degraded the majesty of the throne, the secret correspondence of religion and interest engaged him to favour the cause of Genseric.³⁰ When Leo had delivered himself from that ignominious servitude, he listened to the complaints of the Italians, resolved to extirpate the tyranny of the Vandals, and declared his alliance with his colleague Anthemius, whom he solemnly invested with the diadem and purple of the West.³¹

This Anthemius is a senatorial, almost an imperial, figure, whose grandfather of the same name served as chief minister at the accession of Theodosius II. It is possible to imagine – though Gibbon is far from saying so – a Byzantine politics behind his investment as western emperor: Leo distancing himself from a colleague who in many ways outranked him, and at the same time lessening the power of the house of Aspar. What matters in western history, however, is on the one hand that Constantinople is making a serious attempt to assert itself in restoring western empire; but on the other, that Anthemius does not bring with him to Rome a military force strong enough to furnish him with his own power base.³² From Gibbon's elegy for Majorian we know that he saw the western emperors failing through lack of an Italian army, and the macro-narrative of the *Decline and Fall* traces the causes of this lack backwards for five hundred years. More immediately, military power in the west is now fragmented beyond any eastern capacity to recentralise it. In Gaul and Spain, the Visigoths are freed by the disappearance of the Aetian strategy to construct an independent kingdom, kept Roman only by their alliances with the provincial landowning aristocracies. In Italy, Ricimer remains the predominant warlord, interested only in power in the subalpine peninsula. Anthemius's first step is to marry Ricimer to his daughter, holding out hopes that the patrician's family may be in line for the imperial succession; a tactic as old as Stilicho, Adolphus and Flavius Constantius. He cannot impose, though he may suggest, a consolidation of military power into empire. The key to any such policy, however, is not in Italy but in Africa.

(IV)

Gibbon begins his account of Anthemius's reign with a digression into the history of religion. The emperor has somewhere acquired a leaning towards toleration, if not of heresy at least of philosophy and even

³⁰ Genseric is an Arian. The nature of Aspar's heresy is not stated, perhaps in consequence of Gibbon's refusal to deal with the Nestorian controversy.

³¹ pp. 384–5.

³² p. 385: 'a body of guards almost equal to the strength and numbers of a regular army'.

paganism. Gibbon remarks that the last of these has ceased to be a challenge, since the ancient gods have receded so far from belief or ritual practice that they can appear even in Christian poetry; the birth of Christian literature and humanism has occurred. It is remarkable all the same, he continues, that the festival of the Lupercalia, the most archaic (a better word than primitive) of the pagan rituals, performed by 'a grave magistrate running naked through the streets' and imparting fecundity to women by hitting them with thongs as he goes, persisted at Rome to the end of the fifth century. It was a cultural survival from 'an early state of society before the invention of arts and agriculture', but the shepherds Gibbon imagines inventing and practising it are by no means the nomads of the steppe, but themselves the creation of poetic fantasy.

The rustic deities who presided over the toils and pleasures of the pastoral life . . . were such as the fancy of shepherds might create, sportive, petulant and lascivious, whose power was limited, and whose malice was inoffensive; the shepherds of pastoral poetry in an urban society.³³

From this Gibbon turns immediately to the central event, indeed disaster, of Anthemius's reign: the Byzantine expedition against Vandal Africa.

He begins this story without introduction or explanation. We already know that Genseric's seizure of Carthage has altered the face of empire; the Vandals threaten and control the corn supply on which Italy depends, and there have been three attempts to mount expeditions against them, two frustrated by Hun intervention and one by surprise attack in harbour. The last was a western enterprise and its failure brought down the regime of Majorian. Since that time, Genseric has asserted his power by constantly raiding the Mediterranean coasts of both empires, by sacking Rome on a scale exceeding Alaric, and by carrying off Valentinian's women, whom he exploits either to demand tribute or to offer marriage alliances that suggest his willingness to be brought within the system of the twin empires. There has been mention of a treaty with the eastern empire that confined Vandal piracy to the coastlands of the west, and this is supposed to have compelled Ricimer to subject himself to Leo's nominee Anthemius.³⁴ Genseric is made to appear the instrument of Constantinople's policy, and we are given no explanation of the eastern decision to mount a triple offensive, employing vast amounts of money, ships and men,³⁵ on a scale clearly intended for a reconquest of Carthage. It is easy to see what the recovery of Africa might have done for the continuity of the twin empires; but Gibbon's decision to postpone

³³ pp. 386–7. ³⁴ p. 382–3. ³⁵ pp. 389.

Byzantine history to another volume means that he tells us nothing about Leo's decision to undertake it. When he resumes that history in volume IV it will be several years later in his own life and at a historical moment subsequent to the end of the western empire. He will tell us little about Leo or his successors.

Majorian's expedition against Africa would have been a western enterprise, mounted from Spain. That launched by Leo appears to have been predominantly eastern, involving forces sent by sea from Egypt and Cyrenaica, a major armada from Constantinople itself under the empress's brother Basiliscus – there is a Byzantine dimension to this story – and a third force from Dalmatia, where the westerner Marcellinus exercises a power of his own. Gibbon, who is following Procopius's history written in the next century, gives no indication that either Anthemius or Ricimer took any part in it; but it was Italy that was politically affected by the expedition's failure. The story is well known and lacks only a Thucydides to narrate it. The combined fleets and armies threaten a moment when 'Carthage must have surrendered, and the kingdom of the Vandals was extinguished.' Genseric asks time to negotiate and launches an attack by fireships which destroys Basiliscus's fleet and a large part of his army.³⁶ The Egyptian army takes the long road home by land; Marcellinus retreats to Sicily, where he is assassinated by one of his own officers, 'perhaps at the instigation of Ricimer', a remark which Gibbon leaves unexplained; and

Genseric again became the tyrant of the sea; the coasts of Italy, Greece and Asia, were again exposed to his revenge and avarice; Tripoli and Sardinia returned to his obedience; he added Sicily to the number of his provinces; and before he died, in the fullness of years and of glory, he beheld the final extinction of the empire of the West.³⁷

The African expedition, however, had been an eastern enterprise, and Gibbon has given no indication that the western empire – to which Africa historically belonged – was either invited or prepared to take part in it. His decision to defer eastern history to a future volume means that neither now nor later does he consider the origins of the expedition nor the consequences of so massive a failure for Byzantine empire, policy and strategy; and it is never clear whether the installation of Anthemius as western emperor had indicated a programme for resuming control of the west. We are also left in the dark regarding the consequences of the African failure for the western empire. There are the long-term consequences of Vandal control of the corn supply, to which Gibbon frequently alludes, but he says nothing of them here; nor does he anticipate a recent

³⁶ pp. 390–1. ³⁷ p. 391.

historian³⁸ in having resort to the counterfactual, imagining what would certainly have been the far-reaching consequences of a Roman reconquest of Africa, and presenting the disintegration of western empire as following from their absence. The role of Genseric in the final Decline and Fall remains more emphasised than specified.

Gibbon turns instead to the Visigoths, presenting the murder of Aetius as leading to the final loss of Gaul and Spain. Theodoric, forgetting the mutilation of his sister, forms an alliance with the Vandals – there is no suggestion that the cunning Genseric kept his kingdom neutral during the African war – and makes war on Aegidius, the independent Roman ruler of central Gaul.

[T]he design of extinguishing the Roman empire in Spain and Gaul was conceived and almost completed in the reign of Euric, who assassinated his brother Theodoric, and displayed, with a more savage temper, superior abilities both in peace and war³⁹

if fewer of the characteristics of a Roman provincial nobleman. He is victorious in Spain, somewhat less so in Gaul, where

[T]he youth of the province were animated by the heroic and almost incredible

nota bene?

valour of Ecdicius, the son of the emperor Avitus . . . From *his* virtues alone the faithful citizens of Gaul derived any hopes of safety or freedom; and even such virtues were insufficient to avert the impending ruin of their country, since they were anxious to learn, from his authority and example, whether they should profess the alternative of exile or servitude –

or the clerical tonsure, as was the choice of Sidonius, the author Gibbon is following.

The public confidence was lost; the resources of the state were exhausted; and the Gauls had too much reason to believe that Anthemius, who reigned in Italy, was incapable of protecting his distressed subjects beyond the Alps.⁴⁰

Gibbon is allowing us a last glimpse of a virtue become illusory. He now, rather curiously, spends several pages⁴¹ recounting how the Roman senate tried and condemned Arvandus, the praetorian prefect of Gaul; it is unclear whether he wishes to show the senate exercising empire in its last days, or is merely retelling a story set out at length in the source (Sidonius once more) he has before him. This source, like others, situates his narrative in Gaul, but the decisive event that comes next occurs in Italy.

³⁸ Heather, 2005, pp. 396–9. ³⁹ p. 392.

⁴⁰ For both passages, p. 393. Gibbon's emphasis. ⁴¹ pp. 393–6.

Ricimer, the barbarian commander in chief, breaks with Anthemius, whom he has never considered more than an ally – we would like to know more of how each behaved during the war in Africa – and

retired from Rome, and fixed his residence at Milan; an advantageous situation, either to invite or repel the warlike tribes that were seated between the Alps and the Danube.⁴²

The *barbaricum* is resuming its importance; a reservoir of mercenaries who will render the rule of any western emperor untenable. ‘Two independent and hostile kingdoms’ – Anthemius would have disclaimed the term – expose Italy to civil war. There appears on the scene a certain Olybrius, married with Genseric’s connivance to Valentinian’s younger daughter, through whom both Genseric and Ricimer challenge Anthemius’s claim to be a western emperor. Resident in Constantinople, he sails ‘without obstacle (for Genseric was master of the sea)’⁴³ to either Ostia or Ravenna and becomes Ricimer’s candidate for the now disputed purple. Gibbon cannot see how this could have happened without the connivance of Leo as well as the Vandals, but observes in a footnote:

We are ignorant of his motives; but in this obscure period our ignorance extends to the most public and important facts.⁴⁴

Perhaps it does not matter very much. Ricimer alone excepted, no one in the west exerts enough power to make the situation coherent, and part of the truth may be that Constantinople – intentionally or otherwise – never supplied Anthemius with an army that could be a means of empire. In the ensuing war, Rome and the senate support Anthemius, and he somehow acquires a force of Goths to support him; but Ricimer, ‘fortified by a numerous reinforcement of Burgundians and Oriental Suevi’ – do the latter come from the transalpine borderland? – occupies the Vatican and the Janiculum and launches ‘a furious assault on the bridge of Hadrian, or St Angelo’. We are on ground heavy with history, past and future. For the ensuing battle Gibbon has only one late antique source, and that a century after the event, and must rely on two moderns, Sigonio and Muratori.⁴⁵ It is not a sack like those by Alaric and Genseric, but a battle in the streets of Rome like that of AD 70, and possesses historiographic and almost historicist significance. He remarks

Such had been the *saeva ac deformis urbe tota facies*, when Rome was assaulted and stormed by the troops of Vespasian (see Tacit. Hist. iii 82, 83); and every cause of mischief had since acquired much additional energy. The revolution of ages may

⁴² p. 396. ⁴³ p. 398. ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, n. 107. ⁴⁵ p. 399, n. 109.

bring round the same calamities; but ages may revolve without producing a Tacitus to describe them.⁴⁶

Gibbon is not merely a humanist saluting a master, or a philosophic historian who knows that some events require historians to bring out their meaning. Tacitus and his book are part of the history that produced the disaster of AD 468. Writing at the height of imperial power, he knew what had begun to destroy it and would continue to do so; and the absence after him of any historian equal to him in insight was part of the decadence he had foretold. He had himself wondered if history could continue to be written under the conditions surrounding him as he wrote.

In the general chaos, Anthemius is executed by the command of Ricimer, who himself dies of 'a painful disease' six weeks later; and his instrument Olybrius, 'whose death does not betray any symptoms of violence', follows him within seven months. 'In the same year all the principal actors in this great revolution were removed from the stage',⁴⁷ with the exception of Genseric, an actor at a distance, who lives till 477.⁴⁸ In Italy if not in Gaul, it is the end of the *système de l'univers*; the great barbarian chiefs who pursued power within what was left of the imperial structure by the deaths of Aetius and Valentinian. There is left only a miscellany of recently arrived mercenaries from the breakup of Attila's empire beyond the Danube who will have to find out what power is and how to use it.

(V)

The deaths of Anthemius and Ricimer remove the only actors capable of competing for power on an imperial scale, Anthemius as emperor, Ricimer as patrician; and from now till the end of chapter 36 and the western empire, the story will be one of lesser players competing for lesser prizes, until the creative decision is taken to lower the stakes altogether. On the news of Anthemius's murder, the eastern emperor calls a council to choose a successor, and the empress Verina succeeds in nominating Julius Nepos, nephew of the assassinated Marcellinus, who is holding Dalmatia with what remains of his uncle's army after their retreat from Sicily.⁴⁹ We might ask, though Gibbon does not, whether the eastern empire, which had dispatched so large and costly an armada against Genseric, might not have replaced its losses in Africa and sent Nepos to Italy with a more massive force behind him. He encounters 'a furious

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, n. 110. ⁴⁷ p. 399 for all words quoted. The year is 472.

⁴⁸ p. 391, in margin. ⁴⁹ pp. 399–400.

sedition of the Barbarian mercenaries',⁵⁰ a miscellaneous force recruited from the lands of the upper Danube, like – and perhaps continuous with – those brought into Italy by Majorian and Ricimer. Instead of meeting them in the field or making a stand in the impregnable Ravenna, Nepos takes ship and returns (one suspects thankfully) to Dalmatia, thus virtually abdicating the imperial office. Power, such as it is, now rests with 'the army of *confederates*, who formed the defence and the terror of Italy',⁵¹ and with any leader who may appear among them. Gibbon leaves it in no doubt that the western empire was terminated by mercenaries in its own service, and not by invading hordes of barbarian migrants, in a footnote which runs:

Our knowledge of these mercenaries who subverted the western empire is derived from Procopius . . . The popular opinion and the recent historians represent Odoacer in the false light of a stranger and a king, who invaded Italy with an army of foreigners, his native subjects.⁵²

Odoacer is the mercenary general who wins the competition for leadership from his rival Orestes, and it is significant that both men are products of the borderlands where Roman, Germanic, Gothic and Hunnic forms of power have been interacting. Orestes, a Roman from Pannonia, was found in the service of Attila by the embassy in which the historian Priscus took part, while Odoacer was the son of Edecon, of a tribe called the Sciri; the same embassy met him in the same service.⁵³ It is lesser Germanic peoples emerging from the breakup of Attila's hegemony, rather than the historically renowned Goths and Franks, who will figure in the history of Italy and the solemn moment of the end of the western empire.

Orestes becomes patrician and *magister militum* in the service of Nepos, whose troops, clearly barbarians from beyond the frontiers, follow him because he 'affected their manners, conversed with them in their own language, and was intimately connected with their national chieftains by long habits of familiarity and friendship'.⁵⁴ The mercenaries are not merely soldiers of fortune; they retain something of their barbarian culture; they take part in encouraging and compelling the flight of Nepos, and

When Orestes, from some secret motive, declined the purple, they consented . . . to acknowledge his son Augustulus as emperor of the West.⁵⁵

Orestes seems to be triumphant, but his troops now take a step of which we have not heard very much before, but is crucial in the history of Europe and the history of political thought.

⁵⁰ p. 400. ⁵¹ p. 401. Gibbon's emphasis. ⁵² *Ibid.*, n. 117.

⁵³ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 312. ⁵⁴ pp. 401–2. ⁵⁵ p. 402.

[T]hey envied the fortune of their brethren in Gaul, Spain and Africa, whose victorious arms had acquired an independent and perpetual inheritance, and they insisted on their peremptory demand that a *third* part of the lands of Italy should be immediately divided among them.⁵⁶

The dissolution of the empire is now expressly associated with the settlement of armies on the land, and with a history looking back to Augustus and forward to the genesis of what would come to be termed feudalism, entailing a jurisprudence and historiography which debated the Roman and barbaric roles in the foundation of European authority and liberty. Orestes meanwhile refuses the demand, which is rapidly taken up by Odoacer. The 'bold Barbarian' becomes chief of the land-hungry mercenaries of Italy, defeats and kills Orestes, and becomes master of the person of Romulus Augustulus.⁵⁷

There ensues the decision, which to us seems revolutionary, to terminate the succession of western emperors. Gibbon attributes this to Odoacer in person; he obliges Romulus to notify the Roman senate of his abdication, and that body performs the last act in its immemorial history. The senators inform the eastern emperor – Zeno, who has just succeeded Leo, 'after a short rebellion' of which Gibbon says no more – that in their opinion the office of the western emperor has become unnecessary, that they ('the republic', says Gibbon with horror at their choice of words) will be happy under his sole authority; and they request him to confer on Odoacer the title of patrician in the *diocese* (Gibbon's emphasis) of Italy. Zeno sternly reminds them that Julius Nepos is still their lawful emperor, but as he has no intention of resuming that office, Zeno addresses Odoacer by the title of patrician, and receives from him the imperial insignia for which the west has no further use, though their sacred character is in no way denied.⁵⁸

This is the end of Roman empire in the west, the climactic moment Gibbon has been writing to reach, after which any history must be new if it is not to be anticlimactic: the end of empire in the sense that the authority structure by which emperors succeed one another, and exercise power which will be transmitted to their successors, can no longer operate and will be replaced by that of barbarian kings ruling both in ways understood by their peoples and as Roman magistrates whose authority comes from so far off as to be in a high degree nominal. As a revolution, however – the replacement of one system of government, society and history by another – it is rendered imperfect by the fact that no historian – not even the Comte du Buat – supposes the barbarians to have had any ideology of their own.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* ⁵⁷ *Ibid.* ⁵⁸ For the whole transaction, see p. 404.

Gibbon is writing a decade before 'the revolution in France' caused the modern sense of that term to explode into the European consciousness; and when he used the word for the end of Roman empire – which in this chapter he does once only – he probably thought of it as having its classical meaning. 'The triumph of barbarism' is still a long way off; the barbarians desire to be thought of as Romans, but have yet to face the question of in what ways they are. As for 'the triumph of religion', we do not read that the events of 476 called forth the re-evaluation of history which Orosius and Augustine had offered in response to those of 410; and we have already seen that Gibbon did not respond, probably by choice, to what Augustine had to say in the *De civitate Dei*.

He of course understands the momentous nature of the termination of the western succession. The subheadings to chapter 36 include 'Total extinction of the western empire' – words it is easy to read as over-statement – and 'Reign of Odoacer, the first barbarian king of Italy'. This is not the occasion, however, for a grand elegy on the Roman empire, or for a consideration of the process of its fall. Since we lack independent evidence of Gibbon's authorial operations, or the order in which he wrote chapters, we are unable to say, whatever the temptation, that he had determined to defer such matters to the *General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West*, which concludes volume III two chapters later, an essay of which he had already written a draft. We are left with the obligation to examine how chapter 36 actually ends. Gibbon furthers his account of the peaceful character of Odoacer's termination of the succession by relating how Romulus Augustulus, instead of being hastily murdered like the sons of Stilicho and many other defeated candidates for power, was given a handsome allowance and allowed to live out his days in the villa of Lucullus on the Bay of Naples. Odoacer was clearly trying to lower the temperature of political contest; but there would have been room here for a grand ironic contrast between the historical figures of Lucullus the builder of the villa – soldier, politician and immensely wealthy connoisseur in the triumphant age of the senatorial aristocracy – and Romulus its last occupant. Gibbon comments on the historical irony of Romulus's two names, and gives a history of the villa itself to its demolition in the tenth century;⁵⁹ but in this chapter he is not pulling out the most resonant stops on the organ.

There is one paragraph which seems to relate Decline and Fall in the grand manner, and should be quoted in full.

⁵⁹ pp. 405–7.

Odoacer was the first Barbarian who reigned in Italy, over a people who had once asserted their just superiority above the rest of mankind. The disgrace of the Romans still excites our respectful compassion, and we fondly sympathise with the imaginary grief and indignation of their degenerate posterity. But the calamities of Italy had gradually subdued the proud consciousness of freedom and glory. In the age of Roman virtue the provinces were subject to the arms, and the citizens to the laws, of the republic, till those laws were subverted by civil discord, and both the city and the provinces became the servile property of a tyrant. The forms of the constitution, which alleviated or disguised their abject slavery, were abolished by time and violence; the Italians alternately lamented the presence or the absence of the sovereigns whom they detested or despised; and the succession of five centuries inflicted the various evils of military license, capricious despotism, and elaborate oppression. During the same period, the Barbarians had emerged from obscurity and contempt, and the warriors of Germany and Scythia were introduced into the provinces, as the servants, the allies, and at length the masters, of the Romans, whom they insulted or protected. The hatred of the people was suppressed by fear; they respected the spirit and splendour of the martial chiefs who were invested with the honours of the empire; and the fate of Rome had long depended on the sword of those formidable strangers. The stern Ricimer, who trampled on the ruins of Italy, had exercised the power, without assuming the title, of a king; and the patient Romans were insensibly prepared to acknowledge the royalty of Odoacer and his Barbarian successors.⁶⁰

Here of course is the familiar grand narrative: the suicide of virtue turned to conquest, the empire as the perpetual decay of the republic, the barbarian takeover of a people who will no longer defend themselves; everything except the partial Romanisation of the barbarians, and any allusion whatever to the role of the Christian church. But on closer inspection we must acknowledge that the function of this paragraph is to explain the replacement of both republic and empire by the rule of kings – a cultural as well as a political mutation – and that in writing of them Gibbon's eye is not on Visigoths or Vandals, but on the role of Odoacer in Italy alone. This, and not the grand farewell to Roman history which it anticipates, is the subject of the remaining pages of this chapter.

Odoacer as king – there has never been a king of Italy before – is a figure who receives and deserves respect. He revives the honorary title of consul and bestows it on respectable senators; though himself an Arian like all western barbarians, he respects the Roman clergy; though he must leave the tax-gathering machinery in place, he intervenes with 'seasonable and popular indulgence'; he reconquers the provinces of Noricum and Dalmatia, and adds them to the kingdom of Italy.⁶¹ He is in short until his final years what an emperor of the west, given the loss of Gaul, Spain

⁶⁰ p. 407. ⁶¹ p. 408.

and Britain, ought to have been; and it comes as a surprise to learn that, due to long-term causes, his kingship ended in failure. Depopulation and the decay of agriculture are the causes, and Gibbon goes back to the introduction of the *latifundia* in search of their origins;⁶² but a society dependent on imported grain is fatally undermined by the Vandal conquest of Africa.

In the division and the decline of the empire, the tributary harvests of Egypt and Africa were withdrawn; the numbers of the inhabitants continually diminished with the means of subsistence; and the country was exhausted by the irretrievable losses of war, famine, and pestilence . . . The plebeians of Rome, who were fed by the hand of their master, perished or disappeared as soon as his liberality was suppressed; the decline of the arts reduced the industrious mechanic to idleness and want; and the senators, who might support with patience the ruin of their country, bewailed their loss of wealth and luxury.⁶³

Genseric, though unmentioned, reappears; and we have reached a point where the decline of the city and of the empire become one. It finally appears that the seizure of lands on which to settle mercenaries, the foundation of Odoacer's victory over Orestes, both contributes to the depopulation of his kingdom and helps to make it ungovernable.

The distress of Italy was mitigated by the prudence and humanity of Odoacer, who had bound himself, as the price of his elevation, to satisfy the demands of a licentious and turbulent multitude. The kings of the barbarians were frequently resisted, deposed, or murdered, by their native subjects; and the various bands of Italian mercenaries, who associated under the standard of an elective general, claimed a larger privilege of freedom and rapine.

We have reached the foundation of Harrington's 'Gothic polity': the ungoverned world in which there is no way of paying soldiers except settling them on the land. Gibbon continues:

A monarchy destitute of national union and hereditary right hastened to its dissolution. After a reign of fourteen years Odoacer was oppressed by the superior genius of Theodoric, king of the Ostrogoths; a hero alike excellent in the arts of war and of government, who restored an age of peace and prosperity, and whose name still excites and deserves the attention of mankind.⁶⁴

It is a puzzling conclusion to chapter 36. The kingdom of Theodoric, its claim to admiration, and the consequences of its destruction (along with Genseric's) by the armies of Justinian, will furnish major themes to Volume IV of the *Decline and Fall*; but this narrative will not appear until 1788 and is result rather than cause of the extinction of the empire of

⁶² p. 409, n. 142. ⁶³ p. 409. ⁶⁴ For both passages, p. 410. Note the word 'Italian'.

the west, the climax of Volume III and the present series. Nor does Gibbon end the earlier volume at this point. Two chapters and the *General Observations* remain, and the problem remains that of why Gibbon ended his third volume by writing them and what he achieved by doing so.

Part VII

After the Fall: Towards a History
Not Written

21 Ends and beginnings: the conclusion of Gibbon's third volume

(I)

Gibbon had now arrived at a point terminal in more ways than one. He had completed the first of the three stages into which the preface of 1776 had proposed dividing the history of the Decline and Fall: that, to use his own words, from 'the fortunate age of Trajan and the Antonines' to 'the total extinction' of the Roman empire in the west. It had taken him five years and three volumes to reach this point, and of the original three stages there remained two: that from Justinian to Charlemagne, and that from the revival of empire in the west to its total extinction in the east. We know, though Gibbon in 1781 did not, that these stages would be covered by three further volumes, and that these were not published for another seven years. There is a disproportion between the two halves of Gibbon's work. *Barbarism and Religion*, to give the present series its title, will not continue its close analysis beyond the first of the two trilogies into which the *Decline and Fall* is divided, but cannot avoid looking beyond its end to see how it may point towards – though in some respects away from – its successor.

Gibbon had known from the outset that he was free to stop at the end of the western empire, but that it was overwhelmingly probable that he would go on. He could have stopped for several reasons. Decline and Fall was itself a western concept, centred on the decline of the Roman republic and then of the principate and empire, succeeding the republic. The theme of the decline and disappearance of Roman civil and military virtue was a Latin narrative, told by Latin historians and their humanist successors. It had led him to open the first of the grand narratives guiding historians in the eighteenth century and before, that known in these volumes as 'the first Decline and Fall', and he had employed it constantly if with increasing complexity down to the climax of 476. There had arisen beside it a rival narrative, that of the rise of the Christian church and its supernatural values, and this too he had employed, sceptically and grudgingly but carefully and exactly, as part of the story of decline and replacement; though it had played a lesser part in his third volume than in

his second. But this too, though it originated in the Greek and Jewish east, was predisposed to become a Latin narrative. With the rise of the Roman papacy – a story Gibbon had yet to reach – the history of the church became essential to a history of the western middle ages, as was its replacement by the Protestant and then Enlightened grand narrative studied in the second volume of this series. This was a modern history, and Gibbon unlike his peers was not called upon to write it; but it was ever-present in his mind and guided the history he did write.

There were good reasons, therefore, why both Gibbon and his readers should be satisfied with a western and Latin history and should not feel much interest in others; it was indeed a problem for him both to write the later stages of the *Decline and Fall*, and to find a readership for them. Had there indeed been a Decline and Fall of the eastern empire, and if so in what had it consisted? Historians before him had asked this question, but not with the urgency that came of feeling themselves part of the modern history it entailed. West European history was now self-narrating and contemporary; a classical, Christian and Enlightened narrative was present to its readers and they possessed comprehensive schemes for bringing it down to themselves. If Gibbon wished to continue his history past the fall of the western empire, he faced two difficulties: first, that there was no grand narrative presenting eastern (or ‘Byzantine’) history as containing the sources of its own Decline and Fall; second, that a grand narrative of the post-Roman west already existed and had been told – notably by William Robertson, whom he greatly admired – so authoritatively that there was no need for Gibbon to re-narrate it.

The story of how Gibbon dealt with this double problem is the story of how he made his way from the trilogy of volumes completed in 1781 to the second trilogy, not published until 1788. Since the second is not the narrative of the decline of Rome, but – to name only its Christian themes – of the resurgence of papal Rome and the delayed fall of imperial Constantinople, it is left to other hands; but the history of the first trilogy may be completed by a study of how it led into the second. Gibbon did not break off his third volume at the deposition of Romulus Augustulus, but added two further chapters and the concluding essay, *General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West*. We proceed by examining this group of writings and asking what he intended and achieved by writing them and placing them where he did.

(II)

The essays concluding volume III puzzle us by their lack of coherent relationship to Gibbon’s narrative. Chapter 37 consists of two

unconnected essays in the field of ecclesiastical history, and it is a temptation to suppose that they were written independently of each other and brought together only to form this chapter. The second of them, indeed, points towards the subject matter of chapter 38, which in turn is a massive essay on the growth and historiography of a post-Roman west; lying at a distance, however, from the themes of the era of Justinian, to which Gibbon has begun to signal his next move. Finally, the *General Observations*, apparently written in part before Gibbon began to compose his first volume, are a set of reflections on the philosophical history of society, variously when at all connected with the narrative on which they are said to be reflections. It is not at all easy to read Volume III as closing with a summary of the narrative which it has concluded; but we should ask ourselves whether any historiographic convention in his day obliged Gibbon to close a volume in such a way. Certainly, it was not his practice to do so. At the outset of his enterprise, he had given warning that after he had reached the fall of Constantinople in 1453, he would turn back and write several chapters on the city of Rome in the middle ages, and this in the event he did. We have seen how, when the chapters of his first volume had reached the victory and conversion of Constantine, and were already in print, he took the fatal decision to add chapters 15 and 16.¹ It should not surprise us to find him adding chapters after arriving at the climactic year 476, but we are entitled to remark on the lack of coherence they display.

Gibbon introduced his thirty-seventh chapter in terms that indicate its lack of unity.

The indissoluble connection of civil and ecclesiastical affairs has compelled and encouraged me to relate the progress, the persecutions, the establishment, the divisions, the final triumph, and the gradual corruption of Christianity. I have purposely delayed the consideration of two religious events interesting in the study of human nature, and important in the decline and fall of the Roman empire. I. The institution of the monastic life; and II. The conversion of the northern Barbarians.²

Perhaps for the first time, he was claiming to have presented a unified history of Christianity in, and superseding, the history of the Roman empire. The headings, from 'progress' to 'corruption', under which he now presented that history, would direct his readers' retrospective attention to chapters 15–16, 20–21, 23 and 27–28 of the *Decline and Fall* as so far published; 28 alone belonging to the third volume, where it presented 'the final triumph and the gradual corruption'. But in civil history, chapter

¹ *RFT*, p. 6. ² Womersley, 1994, II, p. 411.

28 fell during the reign, and did not reach the death, of Theodosius I, and 'the decline and fall of the Roman empire' – in the limited but dominant sense of the extinction of imperial authority in the west – reached its climax under his sons and their western successors. The final phase, from Honorius to Odoacer, had been related in chapters 29 through 36, and in none of these had 'ecclesiastical affairs' played any causative role at all. Bishops from Augustine of Hippo to Leo of Rome had appeared as occasional actors, but no pope – the term itself appears rarely – had been mentioned as consulted by Odoacer when he explained the abdication of Romulus Augustulus to the eastern emperor; and the attempts of Orosius and Augustine to set Alaric's sack of 410 in a context of sacred history had been dismissed as of little weight. It is not too much to say that 'the indissoluble connection of civil and ecclesiastical affairs' had last figured in the *Decline and Fall* when Ambrose of Milan performed his memorable rebukes of Theodosius I, and we have therefore to ask what Gibbon meant by calling it indissoluble and what in fact he thought that it was. These questions will become one of causality; are we to endorse the belief, strong from the clerics of the eighteenth century to the atheists of the twenty-first, that Gibbon thought (but did not always say) that the rise of the church was a principal cause of the disintegration of the empire? We face the facts that he had recounted the two processes in chapter-sequences distinct from one another, and had said that the 'indissoluble connection' had 'compelled and encouraged' him – a suggestive choice and ordering of words – to relate ecclesiastical history as well as civil. What that connection was we have yet to hear.

Nor are we likely to find our questions answered in chapter 37. The rise of monasticism and the conversion of the barbarians are separate 'events ... important in the decline and fall of the Roman empire'; but they have been 'purposely delayed' until both the fall of the western empire and the triumph and corruption of Christianity have been narrated in detail and thereby supplied with causes. The 'consideration' of these 'religious events' occurs subsequent to the narrative of the 'indissolubly connected' processes of civil and ecclesiastical history. Not for the first time, Gibbon is delaying ecclesiastical history until he has finished with imperial, just as elsewhere we have found him delaying eastern history until he has finished with western. We have therefore to ask whether the rise of monasticism and the conversion of the barbarians are connected with one another, or whether they are disquisitions separately written and included at this point before major narratives can proceed. If we give affirmative answers to the latter question, chapter 37 will remain not unified.

With the appearance of the monks, Peter Brown remarked to the conference at which *Barbarism and Religion* began to be an enterprise,

the restrained irony with which Gibbon traces the rise of the Christian Church breaks down . . . The monk ceased to be a man because he had burst free from the merciful integument of society.³

'Glorious was the *man* (I abuse that term)' wrote Gibbon later in this chapter, who had discovered a new way of mortifying his body.⁴ But the body was social; Gibbon's sustained and almost obsessive denunciation of monasticism was not a defence of the flesh so much as of society, and it was the rejection of the exchanges of humanity, of which society consisted, that rendered the monk – or, though we read less of her, the self-consecrated virgin – lower than a human being. We have reached the point where the Enlightened insistence on the primacy of society and sociability becomes dogma, in the face of a discipline – it is more than a doctrine – which denies it altogether. The anchorite, male or female, has performed that denial,

inspired by the savage enthusiasm which represents man as a criminal, and God as a tyrant,⁵

and Gibbon is horrified to find this enthusiasm described as a 'DIVINE PHILOSOPHY' (the capitals are his own).⁶ It is possible that the Greek word could denote a practice or way of living rather than a doctrine; but with monasticism, doctrine and discipline become one, and Gibbon is concerned not with what monks thought, but with what they were, as they appeared in such numbers that they 'overspread and darkened the face of the Christian world'.⁷ Their emergence was a historical phenomenon, or 'event', but there is a sense in which they do not form a part of history so much as deny it (though he cites two Catholic and one Protestant histories of monasticism in considerable detail⁸). To the extent to which they succeed in rejecting society, their history is less that of their modification by the processes of history than of the consequences of their denial of it; and this part of chapter 37 is less a narrative of what became of monasticism in society than a detailed exploration and indictment of the pathology of the negation of sociability.

As Peter Brown perceived, Gibbon could employ historical irony in writing of bishops, because while they proclaimed values above those of

³ Bowersock, Clive and Graubard (1977), p. 44.

⁴ Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 426–7; Gibbon's emphasis. ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 411.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 412. ⁷ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 756.

⁸ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 411, n. 1. This chapter may do less than justice to the depth of Gibbon's scholarship on this matter.

society they took an active part both in governing it and in challenging its government; they changed it and were changed by it, and there was what we should call a dialectic at work. But on the premise that monks and nuns rejected sociability altogether, there could only be study of the monstrous consequences of their doing so, and if they were found to be accepting the values and defects of society in spite of their rejection of it, Gibbon could only employ irony for the lesser purposes of denouncing their hypocrisy and criticising their original rejection. Much of this chapter reads as familiar Protestant polemic; but we remain aware of the *philosophe* underpinnings beneath it.

What began as an indictment of the monks' 'enthusiasm' becomes increasingly, as the chapter takes what shape it has, a portrayal of its Humean opposite.

These unhappy exiles from social life were impelled by the dark and implacable genius of superstition,⁹

language which seems to require clarification. As the Christian centuries progressed, monks, especially in the west, were active in promoting the cults of saints and relics; but we were given to understand earlier that these tended to make Christianity a religion of social practices not unlike the polytheism that preceded it. Unless we are to suppose that monks were from the beginning prone to hypocrisy and self-deception, it is hard to reconcile the primacy of 'superstition' with the 'enthusiasm' of solitude and mortification. Perhaps we should remember that, in Protestant thought particularly, the 'enthusiast' in his final form was the antinomian prophet who believed himself directly possessed by God, whereas the monk was perpetually engaged in a desperate search for God that might never be satisfied. His 'superstition' consisted in the fantasies that arose in his imagination as he pursued his search; the wild extremes of mortification and the imagined temptations by legions of demons (commonly female¹⁰). The solitaries of the Egyptian desert were of course peculiarly given to imagining these; but, especially as monasticism spread to the west, monks and nuns increasingly became regulars, living in communities under a common rule. Gibbon is hardly at the beginning of a history of the Latin middle ages and will never be engaged in writing one; but his eye may be on west as well as east when we find him telling us that a devotional community is not a true society since it does not engage in the exchange of ideas.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 416. The word first appears on p. 413. ¹⁰ p. 426, n. 64 (from preceding page).

The lives of the primitive monks were consumed in penance and solitude, undisturbed by the various occupations which fill the time, and exercise the faculties, of reasonable, active, and social beings ... Recluse fanatics have few ideas or sentiments to communicate ... and at their silent meals, they were enveloped in their cowls, inaccessible, and almost invisible, to each other. Study is the resource of solitude; but education had not prepared and qualified for any liberal studies the mechanics and peasants who filled the monastic communities. They might work; but the vanity of spiritual perfection was tempted to disdain the exercise of manual labour; and the industry must be faint and languid which is not excited by the sense of personal interest.¹¹

Though this might apply to the more austere communities anywhere, Gibbon's notes suggest that here, as in the chapter generally, his eye is on Egypt and the east. He is aware of the spread of monasticism westward as far as Ireland,¹² and concedes that regular communities must sustain themselves economically. He mentions in passing 'the garden and fields, which the industry of the monks had often rescued from the forest or the morass', but goes on to suggest that this industry languished as pious benefactions increased.¹³ On the whole, his account is focused on the still urban east, and has not reached the rise of western monasticism and its vigorous role in the expansion of Latin Europe. There is a footnote, however, which acknowledges that 'the monks were gradually adopted as a part of the ecclesiastical hierarchy',¹⁴ and it would not have been impossible to pursue the historical irony – so visible in the case of the secular clergy – of the involvement of communities withdrawn from the world in its economical and civil government. Horror at the denial of sociability, however, continues to dominate this chapter, and there is a cynical account of how sinister motives moved monks to tempt citizens to renounce the world and their primary duty to it. 'The indignant father bewailed the loss, perhaps, of an only son', who should have perpetuated the line of his ancestors; 'the credulous maid was betrayed by vanity to violate the laws of nature', which enjoined the duty of maternity; 'and the matron aspired to imaginary perfection by renouncing the virtues of domestic life'.¹⁵ The Spirit had become the enemy of family and society, and it was possible to present it as an agent of the Decline and Fall.

The subjects of Rome, whose persons and fortunes were made responsible for unequal and exorbitant tributes, retired from the oppression of the Imperial government; and the pusillanimous youth preferred the penance of a monastic, to the dangers of a military, life. The affrighted provincials of every rank, who fled before the Barbarians, found shelter and subsistence; whole legions were buried in

¹¹ p. 424. ¹² p. 416. ¹³ pp. 422–3. ¹⁴ p. 417, n. 26. ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, the same page.

these religious sanctuaries; and the same cause which relieved the distress of individuals impaired the strength and fortitude of the empire.¹⁶

This language recurs (if it had not already been included) in the *General Observations*, and has more than once been taken to mean that the rise of Christianity was the ultimate cause of the fall of Rome. But this passage clearly states that the flight to the desert and the spread of monasticism in the cities were subsidiary to causes of decline other than Christianity. Over-taxation in Gibbon's view was as old as Diocletian and had merely been intensified by Constantine; while the separation of army and empire from society and culture had been the theme of the *Decline and Fall* since its opening chapters and could be traced to times preceding them. Monasticism, profoundly though Gibbon detested it, was as much an effect as a cause of the process he was relating.

There was a concluding circumstance which could not escape mention. Gibbon as *érudit* could not deny that the literature and historiography central to his culture owed much of their presence in it to monkish copyists. He wrote:

The monastic studies have tended, for the most part, to darken, rather than to dispel, the cloud of superstition. Yet the curiosity or zeal of some learned solitaries –

he does not wish to admit that the scriptorium was an essential feature of monastic labour –

has cultivated the ecclesiastical and even the profane sciences: and posterity must gratefully acknowledge that the monuments of Greek and Roman literature have been preserved and multiplied by their indefatigable pens.

A footnote adds:

Mabillon . . . has collected many curious facts to justify the literary labours of his predecessors both in the East and West. Books were copied in the ancient monasteries of Egypt . . . and by the disciples of St. Martin . . . Cassiodorus has allowed an ample scope for the studies of the monks; and *we* shall not be scandalized if their pen sometimes wandered from Chrysostom and Augustin to Homer and Virgil.¹⁷

These were far from being the only poets copied. Since the failure of Julian's attempt to cut Christians off from the schools of rhetoric, the new religion had been intimately involved in the study of what would come to be termed the *litterae humaniores*, and this was by Gibbon's time a cardinal

¹⁶ p. 418.

¹⁷ p. 422, and n. 52. Gibbon's emphasis. A recent account of the often purblind and mindless copying of the scriptorium (Greenblatt, 2012, pp. 37–44) would have confirmed Gibbon's darkest visions.

fact of literary culture. He could not deny it; but his language indicates his desire to minimise or trivialise the monastic role in cultural transmission. He could not overcome his sense of the gap between the legends of monastic hagiography and the classical literature which remained the basis of his own Enlightenment

These extravagant tales, which display the fiction, without the genius, of poetry, have seriously affected the reason, the faith, and the morals of the Christians. Their credulity debased and violated the faculties of the mind; they corrupted the evidence of history; and superstition gradually extinguished the hostile light of philosophy and science. Every mode of religious worship which had been practised by the saints, every mysterious doctrine which they believed, was fortified by the sanction of divine revelation, and all the manly virtues were oppressed by the servile and pusillanimous reign of the monks. If it be possible to measure the interval between the philosophic writings of Cicero and the sacred legend of Theodoret, between the character of Cato and that of Simeon,¹⁸ we may appreciate the memorable revolution which was accomplished in the Roman empire within a period of five hundred years.¹⁹

Gibbon's heroes are still the glorious failures of the dying republic. Two martyrs of the lost cause – Cicero the social philosopher and Cato the embodiment of austere civic virtue – present the ancient order whose decay constitutes the Decline and which reveals the roots of his Enlightenment. It has been shown in a work still valuable²⁰ how a dialectic between Cato's virtue and Cicero's humanity underlay much thinking in eighteenth-century England; and these are the figures whom Gibbon here uses as benchmarks from whom to measure and relate the ultimate degeneracy of the monks. Since he saw the latter as self-expelled from society, he could provide no narrative of their interactions with its history, and the history of the medieval west which he never wrote in full²¹ would have had room for popes and bishops, but never for monks – even as copyists and scholars. If there is any relationship between the first and second parts of chapter 37, it lies in the contrast between monks denying their humanity and barbarians accepting Christianity in forms which transformed their social character.

(III)

If then the [first section](#) of this chapter is a polemic against those who have placed themselves beyond the reach of history, the second moves towards

¹⁸ Simeon Stylites, to whom Gibbon has devoted a long denunciatory passage (p. 427).

¹⁹ pp. 428–9. ²⁰ Browning, 1981.

²¹ It will nevertheless be found present in the history he did write.

becoming what Gibbon in a footnote terms ‘an ecclesiastical and even philosophical history’,²² in which Christianity appears as an agent first in the civilisation of the barbarians, and second in the creation of Europe in the modern, i.e. post-Roman, sense of the term. To understand how the chapter takes this shape, we must look back towards the shepherd origin of the invading barbarians, and even towards shepherd society as the second stage in the philosophical history of civilisation and humanity. Before leaving the invective against the monks, it is worth noticing a passage in which Gibbon mentions a sect of solitaries who

aspired to reduce themselves to the rude and miserable state in which the human brute is scarcely distinguished above his kindred animals; and the numerous sect of Anachorets derived their name from their humble practice of grazing in the fields of Mesopotamia with the common herd.²³

This deliberate attempt to deny themselves even the savagery of the hunter-gatherer and sink below the condition of humanity itself is the ultimate of which fanaticism is capable; but fanaticism in its turn can take shape only at a certain level of civilisation, here the degenerate condition of Roman Mesopotamia. The second section of the chapter opens:

The progress of Christianity has been marked by two glorious and decisive victories: over the learned and luxurious citizens of the Roman empire; and over the warlike Barbarians of Scythia and Germany, who subverted the empire and embraced the religion of the Romans.²⁴

It was among the former that enthusiasm and superstition joined to produce a perverse denial of humanity; but we are now to hear how the shepherd peoples of Germany and Scythia entered into what remained of Roman civility and were themselves civilised by a variety of agencies of which the religion that had produced the monks was one. This process began beyond the frontiers, before the settlement of barbarian kingdoms in the Roman provinces.

The Goths were the foremost of these savage proselytes; and the nation was indebted for its conversion to a countryman, or at least to a subject, worthy to be ranked among the inventors of useful arts who have deserved the remembrance and gratitude of posterity.²⁵

This is Ulphilas, ‘the bishop and apostle of the Goths’, descended from Roman provincials forcibly transplanted beyond the Danube by Gothic raiders in the time of Gallienus. His Christianity was Arian, and Tillemont had thought it necessary to relate his history before that of the Gothic

²² Below, p. 448. ²³ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 426.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 429. Used as epigraph to volume V of this series. ²⁵ *Ibid.*

invasions of 376, partly to praise him as a Christian and a lawgiver, partly to use his heretical beliefs as an illustration of how easily the highest of social virtues might be corrupted by human pride in the absence of the gift of grace.²⁶ Gibbon notices this judgement,²⁷ but it is only now, a century later in history, that he brings Ulphilas into the story, as an instrument not of evangelism true or false, but of civilisation.

The character of Ulphilas recommended him to the esteem of the Eastern emperors, where he twice appeared as the minister of peace; he pleaded the cause of the distressed Goths, who implored the protection of Valens;

– he plays no part in Gibbon's account of these events²⁸ –

and the name of *Moses* was applied to this spiritual guide, who conducted his people through the deep waters of the Danube to the Land of Promise. The devout shepherds, who were attached to his person and tractable to his voice, acquiesced in their settlement at the foot of the Maesian mountains, in a country of woodlands and pastures, which supported their flocks and herds, and enabled them to purchase the corn and the wine of the more plentiful provinces. These harmless Barbarians multiplied in obscure peace and the profession of Christianity.²⁹

Ulphilas has moved out of ecclesiastical into philosophical history, as the leader of a shepherd people neither steppe nomads nor warlike transhumants, content to settle on the margins of an empire of whose commerce they form part. All this has been preceded by an account of his contributions to Christianity as a religion for civilised literates, by his translation of the Bible into a Gothic designed to be read and his improvement or invention of an alphabet for the purpose.³⁰ He is the apostle only of a minor alliance of 'lesser Goths',³¹ but serves to introduce the greater subject of the conversion of the barbarians in general. The Visigoths become Christians as they identify with the Romans over whom they come to rule, and:

during the same period Christianity was embraced by almost all the Barbarians who established their kingdoms on the ruins of the Western empire.

Gibbon enumerates these, down to the mercenary bands who elevated Odoacer to 'the throne of Italy', but adds two significant exceptions almost beyond the limits of empire. The conversion of the Franks is delayed to the time of Clovis, and that of the Angles and Saxons is the work of 'the missionaries of Rome'; but these peoples in their turn initiate an expansion of Christianity, and of empire and civility with it, that will transform the

²⁶ Above, pp. 286–88. ²⁷ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 434, n. 84.

²⁸ Above, pp. 264–68. ²⁹ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 430.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 429–30 and n. 75 ³¹ *Ibid.* and n. 76.

meaning of 'Europe,' and bring about a civilisation other than that of the Mediterranean basin and the Hellenised east. Gibbon comes to the brink of a history which will be medieval and therefore modern.

These Barbarian proselytes displayed an ardent and successful zeal in the propagation of the faith. The Merovingian kings and their successors, Charlemagne and the Othos, extended by their laws and victories the domination of the cross. England produced the apostle of Germany; and the evangelical light was gradually diffused from the neighbourhood of the Rhine to the nations of the Elbe, the Vistula, and the Baltic.

[n.] Mosheim has slightly sketched the progress of Christianity in the North, from the fourth to the fourteenth century. The subject would afford materials for an ecclesiastical and even philosophical history,³²

that of a Europe which, we are to learn, was to become a commonwealth of states, not an empire,³³ based upon the civilisation of barbarians by a renewed Latin Christianity. 'The North' is here the former *barbaricum* of Germany and the borderlands of 'Scythia'; only the rise of modern Russia, to which there is no allusion here, will extend the process into the steppe. Gibbon's subject becomes once more the alliance between evangelism and sociability.

The willingness of incoming barbarians to accept conversion can perhaps be explained as an effect of socialisation, but the society to which they are assimilated has some religious and extra-social components.

The early prejudices of education were insensibly erased by the habits of frequent and familiar society; the moral precepts of the Gospel were protected by the extravagant virtues of the monks; and a spiritual theology was supported by the visible power of relics and the pomp of religious worship.³⁴

This is curious language if read in sequence with the first part of the chapter, in which the extravagances of the monks were denied the status of virtues and condemned as rejection of society. Are we to think of Gibbon as back-tracking and allowing a social role to monastic withdrawal and the cult of relics, elsewhere presented as the ultimate degeneracy of Christianity? Or is the text of chapter 37 not to be read as presenting an integrated narrative? He proceeds, less than a paragraph later, to explain the acceptance of Christianity on grounds more historical if somewhat less political.

The advantage of temporal prosperity had deserted the Pagan cause and passed over to the service of Christianity. The Romans themselves, the most powerful and enlightened nation of the globe –

³² For all words quoted, see p. 431 and n. 79. The point of the latter quotation is that Mosheim related conversion as a series of incidents, not as a process.

³³ Below, pp. 451, 495–96. ³⁴ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 431.

China as ever being thought of as a separate planet –

had renounced their ancient superstition; and if the ruin of their empire seemed to accuse the efficacy of the new faith, the disgrace was already retrieved by the conversion of the victorious Goths. The valiant and fortunate Barbarians who subdued the provinces of the West successively received and reflected the same edifying example. Before the age of Charlemagne, the Christian nations of Europe might exult in the exclusive possession of the temperate climates, of the fertile lands which produced corn, wine and oil; while the savage idolaters and their helpless idols were confined to the extremities of the earth, the dark and frozen regions of the North.³⁵

Gibbon finds this argument in a letter ascribed by the historian St Bede to Daniel bishop of Winchester, but remarks in a footnote that by 723, when it was written, 'the Mahometans, who reigned from India to Spain, might have retorted it against the Christians'.³⁶ In their new Europe, however – at once Mediterranean, continental and Atlantic – the barbarians who had annexed Rome and been annexed by it were beginning to dream of a Germanic empire, and were acquiring the civility on which empire was paradoxically founded. There was the further paradox that their new religion was – notwithstanding monasticism – a source of literacy and civility.

Christianity, which opened the gates of Heaven to the Barbarians, introduced an important change in their moral and political condition. They received, at the same time, the use of letters, so essential to a religion whose doctrines are contained in a sacred book; and while they studied the divine truth, their minds were insensibly enlarged by the distant view of history, of nature, of the arts, and of society. The version of the Scripture into their native tongue, which had facilitated their conversion, must excite, among their clergy, some curiosity to read the original text, to understand the sacred liturgy of the church, and to examine, in the writings of the Fathers, the chain of ecclesiastical tradition.

Gibbon does not pause to remind us that this could be a dangerous enterprise.

These spiritual gifts were preserved in the Greek and Latin languages, which concealed the inestimable monuments of ancient learning. The immortal productions of Virgil, Cicero, and Livy, which were accessible to the Christian Barbarians, maintained a silent intercourse between the reign of Augustus and the times of Clovis and Charlemagne. The emulation of mankind was encouraged by the remembrance of a more perfect state; and the flame of science was secretly kept alive, to warm and enlighten the mature age of the Western world.³⁷

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 432. ³⁶ *Ibid.*, nn. 81, 82.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 432–3. Note the use of 'version' to mean 'translation', and the rather enigmatic use of 'concealed' and 'secretly'.

Gibbon now gives a brighter picture of the role of the scriptorium. The paradox of literacy makes contact with the phenomenon of Christian humanism. Revelation cannot be transmitted without literacy, but the written word makes possible a social reading of its content and authority. If the church holds back from criticising the Word, it has never been inhibited from criticising the Fathers, and rival readings of the Word have led to contests whose transmission is recorded as history. At the same time, since Christians defeated Julian's attempt to exclude them from the schools of rhetoric, they have been readers, and are now becoming transmitters, of the pagan literature of an era without revelation and a social order of leisure, empire and security, from which their present condition is a Decline in civil history, if it is an opportunity of salvation in sacred. The pagan gods may survive only as literary and artistic entertainment, but the pagan poets, philosophers and historians perpetuate the memory of a pre-Christian culture to which both believers and unbelievers make appeals of many kinds. Gibbon identifies humanism and Renaissance with criticism and Enlightenment; but once he has recognised late antique Christian culture as the chief agent of literacy and civilisation among the fifth-century barbarians, he has recognised the church as an agent of non-barbaric modernity.

Nor is he unwilling, at this point, to recognise the new religion as an agent of the social virtues. The passage just quoted continues:

In the most corrupt state of Christianity, the Barbarians might learn justice from the *law*, and mercy from the *gospel*,³⁸

it should be the law of Sinai that he intends here;

and if the knowledge of their duty was insufficient to guide their actions or to regulate their passions, they were sometimes restrained by conscience, and frequently punished by remorse. But the direct authority of religion was less effectual than the holy communion, which united them with their Christian brethren in spiritual friendship.

It is unlikely that Gibbon had the sharing of Christ's body in mind. The communion he mentions is more probably the "union and discipline of the Christian republic", which had characterised the primitive church³⁹ and was now exercised by bishops in correspondence with one another.⁴⁰ This was a civil not less than an ecclesiastical phenomenon.

The influence of these sentiments contributed to secure their fidelity in the service or the alliance of the Romans, to alleviate the horrors of war, to moderate the

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 433. Gibbon's emphasis. ³⁹ *RFT*, p. 244. ⁴⁰ Above, pp. 75–80.

insolence of conquest, and to preserve, in the downfall of the empire, a permanent respect for the name and institutions of Rome,

a principal effect, perhaps, of the conversion of Constantine.

The perpetual correspondence of the Latin clergy, the frequent pilgrimages to Rome and Jerusalem, and the growing authority of the popes, cemented the union of the Christian republic, and gradually produced the similar manners and common jurisprudence which have distinguished from the rest of mankind the independent, and even hostile nations of modern Europe.⁴¹

Gibbon has achieved the outline of a history modern in the sense that it is not ancient; beginning with the barbaric as a prelude to the medieval, and linking the fall of Rome with a version of the 'Enlightened narrative' in which Latin, but never Orthodox, Christianity plays a positive role, and the ecclesiastical originates the sociable. He turns now to the reverse of the medal.

(IV)

[T]he operation of these causes was checked and retarded by an unfortunate accident which infused a deadly poison into the cup of salvation,⁴²

the sacred interfering once more with the operations of society. The 'accident' was that Ulphilas, though he regarded theological disputes as of little importance,⁴³ happened to be an Arian or semi-Arian subscribing to the confession of Rimini;⁴⁴ and the circumstance that his writings alone conveyed Christian teaching in a language spoken by the western barbarians outweighed 'the eloquence of the Latin clergy' – the written word triumphing over the spoken among peoples relatively new to it – and caused them all to adopt a heresy which Theodosius I had stamped out in the rest of the Roman world. This came about in the Latin-speaking provinces, where imperial orthodoxy had always been preferred to the endless disputations of the loquacious Greeks, and groups of Arian barbarians found themselves ruling over populations who took their confessions from the emperor and bishops they considered their lawful governors.⁴⁵ Gibbon is foregrounding persecution while conceding that there was little of it in most provinces. The Catholics were 'resolved to die at the foot of their altars', but

⁴¹ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 433. This account will recur in the *General Observations* (below, pp. 495–96). A generalised indebtedness to Robertson's *View of the Progress of Society* may be detected here.

⁴² *Ibid.* ⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 434, n. 83. ⁴⁴ *Ibid.* ⁴⁵ Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 434–5.

the conquerors evaded ... the disgraceful reproach, or confession, of fear, by attributing their toleration to the liberal motives of reason and humanity; and while they affected the language, they imperceptibly imbibed the spirit, of genuine Christianity;⁴⁶

a curious remark if it implies that the 'spirit' of primitive Christianity was one of charity and toleration. Gibbon has not said this so far; but he may be adopting the strategy of affirming that the religion of the Gospels is mild, peaceable and sociable, and that disputation and persecution came in with the bishops and the Fathers.

He is always ready, however, to draw on the literature of persecution, and now does so in the case of Vandal Africa, where 'the terrible Genseric' emerges for the last time, as the only barbarian king whose rule was founded in conquest, so that he could not endure any possible claimant to toleration. Gibbon possessed, and must follow, several detailed histories of the persecution of Catholics in Vandal Africa, and though he mistrusts them,⁴⁷ uses them in tracing the history of that kingdom to its extinction in the next century.⁴⁸ Genseric's successors are unworthy of 'the monarch of the sea',⁴⁹ and the African Catholics are superior to the Arians in argument. It is this – apart from the usual martyrology, which an Enlightened historian repeats as greedily as an orthodox – which interests Gibbon as ecclesiastical historian. They are tempted to perpetuate apocrypha which become part of the Trinitarian canon: the Athanasian Creed and the spurious text of the Three Witnesses.⁵⁰ The late Joseph Levine studied Gibbon's treatment of the latter at length⁵¹ as displaying his mastery of 'the autonomy of history', that is, of critical method. It is worth giving equal attention to his handling of another text of this time, in which the problem of miracles reappears.

Certain African confessors were supposed to have had their tongues cut out for affirming their Catholic faith. They subsequently appeared at Constantinople, where they were seen by Aeneas of Gaza, a Christian and a Platonic philosopher and – says Gibbon – 'a cool, a learned, and unexceptionable witness, without interest and without passion'. After this testimony to Aeneas's reliability, he goes on to quote his testimony to the condition of the martyrs. Aeneas saw them, heard them speak, 'used my eyes to examine the report of my ears', opened their mouths and satisfied himself that their tongues had indeed been torn out at the roots. Gibbon says nothing and implies no innuendo which might discredit Aeneas's account, but enumerates other witnesses to 'the truth of a miracle which

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* ⁴⁷ p. 437, n. 90. ⁴⁸ pp. 436–7. ⁴⁹ p. 436. ⁵⁰ pp. 442–3.

⁵¹ Levine, 1999, part three.

was . . . submitted during a series of years to the calm examination of the senses'. He then continues:

The supernatural gift of the African confessors, who spoke without tongues, will command the assent of those, and of those only, who already believe that their language was pure and orthodox. But the stubborn mind of an infidel is guarded by secret, incurable suspicion; and the Arian, or Socinian, who has seriously rejected the doctrine of the Trinity, will not be shaken by the most plausible evidence of an Athanasian miracle.⁵²

Gibbon is very close to confessing himself more of an infidel than any Arian or Socinian. We must look back to Hume's essay on miracles⁵³ to understand why he first elevates Aeneas's scientific rationality beyond criticism and then refuses to accept his facts. We are at a point where doubt becomes dogma; the fact that we can doubt our own doubt leaves doubt supreme; and scepticism is itself an 'incurable' condition of the mind. There are no tests of veracity whatever which will induce Hume or Gibbon to accept the report of a miracle, and the fact that Aeneas of Gaza was a disinterested investigator will not make them accept the evidence of his senses. We do not even need to know what Aeneas believed regarding the Trinity.

This excursion into the philosophy of criticism marks a moment of great importance in both Gibbon's utterance of his basic premises and our understanding of them; but it is a digression from any historical narrative taking shape in chapter 37. There has been a highly significant philosophical narrative of the relations between barbarism and religion; but in the final section of that chapter – and of this one – we seem to be looking at the relations between Arian rulers and Catholic subjects in the short-lived barbarian kingdoms set up by Vandals and Visigoths. There are greater themes to come – the Franks in Gaul, the Ostrogoths in Italy – but the second of these will not be before Gibbon's readers until 1788, and in the volumes of 1781 it is easy to suggest that chapter 37 is a clearing of the desk, a summary and dismissal of minor themes before moving on. Gibbon says:

The Vandals and the Ostrogoths persevered in the profession of Arianism till the final ruin of the kingdoms which they had founded in Africa and Italy. The Barbarians of Gaul submitted to the orthodox domination of the Franks; and Spain was restored to the Catholic church by the voluntary conversion of the Visigoths.⁵⁴

He is to trace these happenings in an order the reverse of this: the conversion of Spain in what remains of chapter 37, the rise of the

⁵² For all quotations, Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 443–4. ⁵³ *RFT*, pp. 237–43.

⁵⁴ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 444.

Frankish kingdom in chapter 38, but the great matters of the first sentence not until he devotes volume IV of the *Decline and Fall* to the reign of Justinian. We lack the independent evidence which might tell us just how far the plan of this volume was in Gibbon's mind seven years earlier, and can only consider how far the text of the third volume looks towards the fourth. Chapter 37 goes on to tell us how Visigothic Spain ceased to be Arian, first through the unsuccessful rebellion of a successor-designate against his father, and then – Gibbon is looking ahead as far as the late sixth century – through the more prudent policies of Recared, 'the first Catholic king of Spain',⁵⁵ who calls a council and persuades it, with the aid of a miracle or two, to conform to the church of which Gregory the Great, 'the spiritual conqueror of Britain', is now pope. Relics are exchanged, and Gibbon is able to say that only the conversion of the Lombards of Italy – of whom we hear for the first time – postponed to the end of the seventh century the moment when

the controversy, which Egypt had derived from the Platonic school, was terminated after a war of three hundred years.⁵⁶

He is telescoping his narrative by anticipating events after the wars of Justinian and before the alliance of the popes with the Frankish kingdom. Chapter 37 is concluding as a narrative of ecclesiastical rather than civil history. The Spanish Catholics, like the Africans, make additions to Trinitarian doctrine by declaring that the Spirit proceeds from the Son as well as the Father, the issue which will divide the eastern and western churches centuries later.⁵⁷ Pagans are persecuted in England, and Jews in Spain, where their massive presence will facilitate the Arab conquests not long after; and Gibbon is able to conclude the chapter by reminding the reader that theological argument continued to produce persecutions that weakened the empire. This, however, was an eastern rather than a western phenomenon and its huge consequences were felt in Syria before they spread to Spain.

As soon as the Barbarians withdrew their powerful support, the unpopular heresy of Arius sunk into contempt and oblivion. But the Greeks still retained their subtle and loquacious disposition: the establishment of a new doctrine suggested new questions and new disputes; and it was always in the power of an ambitious prelate or a fanatic monk to violate the peace of the church, and perhaps of the empire. The historian of the empire may overlook those disputes which were confined to the obscurity of schools and synods ... But the East was distracted by the Nestorian and Eutychian controversies, which attempted to explain the mystery of the incarnation, and hastened the ruin of Christianity in her native land. These

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 446. ⁵⁶ p. 448. ⁵⁷ p. 447.

controversies were first agitated under the reign of the younger Theodosius: but their important consequences extend far beyond the limits of the present volume. The metaphysical chain of argument, the contests of ecclesiastical ambition, and their political influence on the decline of the Byzantine empire, may afford an interesting and instructive series of history, from the general councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon, to the conquest of the East by the successors of Mahomet.⁵⁸

So ends chapter 37. A grand narrative has reappeared, and Gibbon is positioned to relate an Eastern Decline and Fall. But he is silently ignoring, rather than apologising for, his earlier omission of the two great councils when relating the reign of Theodosius II, and he does not tell the reader that the whole of volume IV will go by before he returns to consider their theological basis or their consequences in the Islamic conquests. He may or may not have known in 1781 that this would be the case; but volume IV considers the consequences for the west of an eastern attempt to recover it, and neither Mohammed nor Charlemagne will appear until well into volume V. The tug of post-Roman Latin history was still very strong, and it is on this subject that he proceeds to complete volume III. It was already a question among western historians whether Byzantine history after Justinian contained in itself anything worth telling.

⁵⁸ pp. 449–50.

22 The barbarian kingdoms and their laws: the beginnings of a medieval history

(I)

Gibbon was concluding volume III with a group of essays, focused on western history and not very clearly related to one another. Though true, this statement does not prevent chapter 38 from continuing a theme laid down in the second part of the chapter preceding it, and enlarging this into a broad and not unsystematic treatment of some major themes in medieval history and even the history of historiography. Chapter 37, we have just seen, concluded with the extinction of Arianism among the barbarian ruling groups taking over control of Rome's western provinces: a process which was to lead to the formation of barbarian kingdoms professing Catholic orthodoxy in communion with the bishops of Rome. Here, of course, we have the germ of medieval history presented as a western and Latin process, and we continue asking how Gibbon intended to relate this to the Byzantine history he had repeatedly said he was deferring to a future volume. The process of de-Arianisation, however, reached a climax with the conquest of Visigothic and Arian Aquitaine by the Frankish and Catholic kingdom of Clovis; and this in turn is one of several episodes in which the Goths disappear from a western history to which they have given a name that persists to our own day. Chapter 36 ended with praise of the Ostrogothic kingdom of Italy, established by the great Theodoric, who overthrew Odoacer and reigned at a higher level of civility; but we already know that this was to be overthrown in its turn, together with the Vandal kingdom in Africa, by the armies of the eastern emperor Justinian. Only the kingdom of Spain would remain Gothic, until the Islamic conquests of the next century; and this kingdom had left behind it no historical narrative or issue with which Gibbon felt much concern.

We have already begun to look ahead, to matters to be dealt with in the volumes of the *Decline and Fall* published in 1788; and since it is not the intention of *Barbarism and Religion* to study this second trilogy, but to leave it to other hands as a work differing from the first, there is the question how far the present chapter may look ahead to Gibbon's next

volume, seven years later, while exploring the conclusion of volume III. We know, however, that after publishing his second and third volumes in 1781, he was at work on a subsequent volume early in 1782.¹ On the supposition that the matter of volume IV may have been taking shape in his mind as he concluded its predecessor, it becomes relevant that chapter 39 opens that volume by relating the reign of Theodoric in Italy, and that chapter 40 presents an overall picture of the reign of Justinian in Constantinople. Volume IV is devoted almost exclusively to the history of Justinian, of which the destruction of the Gothic kingdom is a principal feature; and it is only in volume V that we learn how his successors were confronted by the explosion of Islam, and how their failure to consolidate control of Italy led to a power vacuum filled centuries later by the appeal of the popes to the Frankish kingdom of Charlemagne. At that point Gibbon is moved to give 'modern history' a new beginning, and to join hands with the 'Enlightened narrative' studied in Volume II of this series. The 'triumph of barbarism and religion' has been consummated.

This is to paint with a broad brush, and to outline Gibbon's second trilogy after disclaiming any intention of doing so. What may justify such a proceeding is the subject matter of chapter 38, published in 1781, and the historiography, early modern as well as late antique, on which it rests. The chapter is predominantly a narrative of the rise to power of Clovis the Frank, from his chieftainship of the Salian tribe in the Rhine delta through his reign as king of a *monarchie françoise*, which has absorbed western Gaul, known as Armorica, the kingships of the Alamanni and Burgundians extending beyond the Rhine, and the Visigothic kingdom in Aquitaine – though not that beyond the Pyrenees which will survive until the Arab conquest of Spain at the end of the seventh century. Clovis's is to be a Catholic monarchy – we hear of the dove from heaven bearing the miraculous *ampoule* to his coronation at Rheims – but above all it is to be the kingdom of France, the word *françoise* changing from its ancient to a modern meaning. Here its history becomes the dominant theme of the western barbarism Gibbon is concerned to present; the Ostrogothic kingdom of Italy becoming part of the history of Justinian and the later effects of his attempted conquests.² As chapter 38 develops, the history of the western kingdoms becomes increasingly a history of laws, turning on the question of how Roman civil law survived among the barbarians and their customs, and how Roman law and its effects upon them was – though here

¹ *EGLH*, pp. 163, 167–8, 183; *A*, p. 326.

² '*Françoise*', the older spelling of '*française*', records the transition from 'Frankish' to 'French'. I have retained the older, as a reminder that we are concerned with early modern historiography.

we must look ahead as far as Gibbon's fifth volume – transformed by the Codes and Digests of Justinian. In more ways than one, chapter 38 opens the door to the grand narrative of western medieval history; but how and why is Gibbon opening it?

To begin asking this question, we must consider the historians on whom he critically relies in writing the chapter. There are the ancients (if they are still ancient): the Byzantine Procopius, an ambitious and ambivalent historian of Justinian and his wars,³ whose accompanying histories of the Vandals, Goths and Franks Gibbon has been using for several chapters; the Goth Jordanes, resident at Constantinople and relying on the history by Cassiodorus written in Gothic Italy; and last and most deplorably,⁴ the history of the Franks written even later by Gregory of Tours, a partly ecclesiastical history of Merovingian barbarism and its decadence. In addition to these, however, Gibbon turns to two moderns, publishing about the time of his birth, whom this volume has already noticed: Mascov's *History of the Ancient Germans* (English translation, 1738)⁵ and Dubos's *Histoire de l'Etablissement de la Monarchie Française dans les Gaules* (1734).⁶ Both placed the Franks at the centre of their histories, but for divergent reasons. Mascov, a Saxon councillor, held – like du Buat, but from another standpoint – that Europeans needed a comprehensive history of the barbarians from whom most of them were descended. He identified 'barbarians' with 'Germans', a comprehensive term derived from Tacitus and extending from the Angles in Britain to the Goths in Ukraine. He held that modern Germans could take pride in their ancestors as successful resisters and then conquerors of the Roman empire.⁷ He emphasised that Franks (and Alamanni) had dominated territory east as well as west of the Rhine, no longer a frontier, and looked ahead to the conquest by Charlemagne and the Saxon emperors of Germany as far as the Vistula, creating a continental or peninsular 'Europe' that replaced the ancient *barbaricum* beyond the Rhine and Danube. A geopolitical shift took place in historical thinking, and this explains the central role which Mascov and others accorded to the Franks. Clovis had ruled a kingdom Germanic as well as Gallo-Roman, and Mascov has little to say of the origins of the French monarchy. He saw Clovis as the founder of the Merovingian kingdom which under the Carolingians would assume the name of a Roman empire; with the

³ Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1254. ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1226. ⁵ p. 1240. ⁶ p. 1212.

⁷ Mascov, 1738, I, pp iii–iv, 'The Author's Preface'. Note the concession that Roman institutions 'as well Ecclesiastical as Civil', were transplanted into the Germanic kingdom, and that 'the *German History*', while superseding 'the Roman', must be learned from sources chiefly Roman (cf. du Buat, above, pp. 397–408), Mascov, 1738, I, p. vii.

extinction of the latter dynasty there would appear a 'Roman German empire' and the 'modern' history of Germany would begin.⁸ Mascov intended to continue his narrative past the 'ancient' history that included the Carolingians, but does not seem to have done so; and the *History of the Ancient Germans* is focused on the two Frankish dynasties.

The Abbé Dubos, a French controversialist and man of letters, helped initiate a debate on the character, legal and political as well as historical, of the *monarchie françoise* which continued into the early years of the Revolution sixty years after him.⁹ It will be necessary to study this in some detail, as it helps explain the shift towards legal history that takes place in Gibbon's chapter, and as it moved Dubos to make some illuminating remarks on the history of historiography in his time. But where Mascov's concern was with the Franks as Germans acting in German history, Dubos was anxious to pursue the mutation of Franks into Frenchmen and the character of the French monarchy that emerged from it. Where Mascov followed history through Merovingian monarchy to Carolingian empire and the replacement of Franks by Saxons, Dubos pursued the sequence of the *trois races* to the point where Capetians replaced Carolingians and began a French history no longer Frankish – as empire had ceased to be in Germany.

All this would be known to Gibbon as he embarked upon the conclusion of his third volume. His culture was Anglo-French rather than German, and the French monarchy dominated his perceptions of modern history, as it did for most authors of the 'Enlightened narrative'. In drafting chapter 38 he was beginning the construction of a post-Roman history so far western as to be Gallic rather than Italian, and studying the Frankish kingdom before turning to the Gothic monarchy in Italy. Both histories pointed the way into the period from Justinian to Charlemagne, which he had designated the second period of his grand narrative. What he intended by this, and how or whether his second period continued the decline and fall of an empire now only eastern, we have yet to discover – as perhaps, in the year 1780, had he.

(II)

Gibbon's account of the expansion of Clovis's chieftainship on the lower Rhine to become the *monarchie françoise* draws on discourses other than those of late antique narrative. He opens chapter 38 with a lengthy paraphrase of a passage in Tacitus, where a Roman commander in the days of

⁸ Mascov, 1738, II, p. xvi. ⁹ Below, pp. 463–64.

Tiberius suggests to the newly subjugated Gauls that it is better for them to have the Roman armies defend them against the barbarous Germans than to do it themselves. The argument is all too effective, and by the fifth century the Gauls have become Romans in culture, but Romans of the late empire, no longer capable of defending themselves against German barbarians and obliged to invite other German barbarians to do it for them.¹⁰

We have rejoined the grand narrative of Decline and Fall, and the Gauls have become civilised landowners and town-dwellers, distressed by the uncouth manners of their uninvited guests. Eighty years before the moment of which Gibbon is writing, the collapse of the Rhine frontier has led to the effective control of Gaul by swarms of Vandals, Suevi, Alani and subsequently Visigoths, whose wanderings have converted the western provinces into a patchwork of warlordships. The descendants of Alaric command the most powerful of these, and it is to their 'kingship' in Aquitaine and Spain that Odoacer and the Roman senate commit what is left of empire beyond the Alps. Gibbon cites, with tongue well in cheek, a lengthy panegyric by the Gallo-Roman Sidonius,¹¹ and observes

The fortune of nations has often depended on accidents; and France may ascribe her greatness to the premature death of the Gothic king at a time when his son Alaric was a helpless infant, and his adversary Clovis an ambitious and valiant youth.¹²

He does not fail to point out that 'Clovis' is one of several variants of the name 'Louis'.¹³ The expansion of the Frankish kingdom is a growth-point leading to the modern history in which Gibbon is himself living, and the Visigothic kingdom is about to be swallowed up in the expansion of Frankish power over the patchwork of principalities left behind by what Mascov's translator calls 'the Universal Transmigration of a Swarm of Nations',¹⁴ meaning the *Volkerwanderung* of 406–8. Clovis first appears as chief of the Salian Franks between the Rhine and the Meuse, rises to pre-eminence among the Franks generally, and achieves his first conquest over 'Syagrius the son of Aegidius', the Roman general who set up in northern Gaul at the head of his own troops. Of the son Gibbon observes that

After the dissolution of the western empire, he might reign with the title, or at least with the authority, of king of the Romans –

a title in fact unthinkable for Romans in their own history. We are looking at a merger of cultures not far from the state of nature.

¹⁰ Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 451–2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 452–3.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, n. 7.

¹⁴ Mascov, 1738, II, p. 411.

As a Roman, he had been educated in the liberal studies of rhetoric and jurisprudence; but he was engaged by accident and policy in the familiar use of the Germanic idiom. The independent barbarians resorted to the tribunal of a stranger, who possessed the singular talent of explaining, in their native tongue, the dictates of reason and equity. The diligence and affability of their judge rendered him popular, the impartial wisdom of his decrees obtained their voluntary obedience, and the reign of Syagrius over the Franks and Burgundians seemed to revive the original institution of civil society.¹⁵

So at least says yet another panegyric by Sidonius. Gibbon is imagining the origin of civil society in terms more Ciceronian than Lockean; a footnote¹⁶ reminds us of ‘the crafty Deioces’ in Herodotus, who raised himself from a judge in the state of nature to the empire of the Medes, ruling from an inaccessible palace with the aid of an army of *agentes in rebus*.¹⁷ But Syagrius is no Oriental despot, but a last of the Romans; with no republic to hand, he has not equipped himself with any machinery of empire. He is easily overthrown by the arms of Clovis, and Gibbon – having introduced the encounter of Roman written law with Germanic oral custom that is to become dominant in this chapter – goes on to a much greater acquisition: that of the nation of the Alamanni, so long powerful at the meeting point of *imperium* and *barbaricum*, who after defeat became the semi-autonomous subjects of the new kingdom. This is a moment in world history.

After the conquest of the western provinces, the Franks alone maintained their ancient habitations beyond the Rhine. They gradually subdued and civilised the exhausted countries as far as the Elbe and the mountains of Bohemia, and the peace of Europe was secured by the obedience of Germany.¹⁸

The creation of a Europe between the northern and southern seas is a Frankish achievement where the Romans failed; it is also a moment in ecclesiastical history and the history of civil society. From the absorption of the Alamanni Gibbon proceeds immediately to Clovis’s decision to accept Christian baptism at the hands of Remigius (St Remy), bishop of Rheims, in an awe-inspiring ceremony which can easily appear a consecration – though Gibbon gives no hint that baptism conferred a new kind of legitimacy on his kingship. The dove descends from heaven, bearing the *sainte ampoule*, and

the new Constantine was immediately baptised with three thousand of his warlike subjects ... But the savage conqueror of Gaul was incapable of examining the

¹⁵ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 455.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, n. 16.

¹⁷ Herodotus, I, cc 96–100.

¹⁸ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 457.

proofs of a religion which depends on the laborious investigation of historic evidence and speculative theology,¹⁹

perhaps fortunately for the new Constantine; the old had been instantly involved in the terrible question of the nature of the God he now accepted. Clovis might find that the support of his reign by the innumerable miracles of St Martin of Tours cost him heavily in endowments;²⁰ but

earth as well as heaven rejoiced in the conversion of the Franks. On the memorable day when Clovis ascended²¹ from the baptismal font, he alone in the Christian world deserved the name and prerogatives of a Catholic king. The emperor Anastasius entertained some dangerous errors concerning the nature of the divine incarnation;²² and the Barbarians of Italy, Africa, Spain, and Gaul were involved in the Arian heresy. The eldest, or rather the only son of the church, was acknowledged by the clergy as their lawful sovereign or glorious deliverer; and the arms of Clovis were strenuously supported by the zeal and fervor of the Catholic faction.²³

Since there is not yet a pope – nor an Ambrose of Milan – whose assertion of spiritual authority might challenge the civil, Clovis is not inconvenienced by the support of the republic of bishops, of whom one is to be found at the head of most of the cities of Gaul. This is especially the case in the far west, known as Armorica, where surviving Roman authority or its traditions have helped the persistence of a confederacy of cities deserving the name of a republic. The bishops mediate its gradual and peaceable absorption into the *monarchie française*, and Gibbon is able to suggest a comparison between Clovis and Henri Quatre; the one savage and the other civilised, but both able to profit by ‘the merits of a seasonable conversion’.²⁴ Like Voltaire, he is confident that neither – though for different reasons – believed or understood the doctrine of the church whose baptism they accepted. Gibbon is now free to relate, at length and in detail, the prolonged and bloody wars by which Clovis added the kingdoms of Burgundy and most crucially Visigothic Aquitaine to a monarchy both Gallic and Germanic, ‘extended far beyond the limits of modern France’,²⁵ and the rival if not the adversary of Theodoric’s kingdom in Italy – never to be exposed like it to the ambitions of Justinian. It is at this point, however, that Gibbon inserts an incident from which may be deduced the controversy that has made the *monarchie française* disputable and significant in the histories of France, of political thought, and of historiography.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 458–9. ²⁰ *Ibid.*, n. 33.

²¹ It was more usual to write ‘descended’. Is Gibbon hinting that civil duties rank above spiritual?

²² These were Eutychian in character; Gibbon’s first allusion to the Nestorian controversy?

²³ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 460. ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 461. ²⁵ p. 471.

(III)

Gibbon now takes a step that involves him in a debate among eighteenth-century scholars, continuing into and beyond his own lifetime. 'After the success of the Gothic war', he says,

Clovis accepted the honours of the Roman consulship. The emperor Anastasius ambitiously bestowed on the most powerful rival of Theodoric the title and ensigns of that eminent dignity; yet, from some unknown cause, the name of Clovis has not been inscribed in the *Fasti* either of the East or West.²⁶

In both text and footnotes, Gibbon makes it clear that he does not in fact believe this story, and that it would be meaningless even if it were true. It rests solely on the authority of Gregory of Tours, writing in the next century, whom he goes on to cite for the even more improbable tale of the 'joyful multitude' of Goths and Gauls in the streets of Tours, hailing a purple-clad Clovis with 'their acclamations of *Consul* and *Augustus*'.²⁷ As he makes clear and his readers already know, the title of 'consul' has become an annual honorific, and that any western ruler should be recognised as 'Augustus' is so far incredible that he does not need to say so. In a footnote to the passage just quoted, Gibbon remarks:

If the evidence of Gregory of Tours were less weighty and positive ... I could believe that Clovis, like Odoacer, received the lasting title and honours of *Patrician*,²⁸

which would have meant something. There can be no better illustration of the truth that Gibbon was still a classical historian faced with a choice between authorities and obliged, once the armoury of criticism was exhausted, to make his choice on grounds that might still be rhetorical. Here he is obliged, by mentioning the myth of Clovis's consulship, to enter upon an ongoing debate over the character of the French monarchy, conducted as a debate over the original legitimacy of the *monarchie française*. In a footnote some pages later, he presents it as the episode in French ideological history which we have already mentioned²⁹ and modern historians still study. 'In the space of thirty years' (in fact thirty-seven),

this interesting subject has been agitated by the free spirit of the Count de Boulainvilliers (*Mémoires Historiques sur l'État de France* ...), the learned ingenuity of the Abbé Dubos (*Histoire Critique de l'Etablissement de la Monarchie Française dans les Gaules* ...), the comprehensive genius of the President de Montesquieu (*Esprit des Loix*, particularly l. xxviii.xxx.xxxi), and the good sense and diligence of the Abbé de Mably (*Observations sur l'Histoire de France* ...).³⁰

²⁶ p. 469. ²⁷ p. 470. ²⁸ p. 469, n. 57. ²⁹ Above, p. 459.

³⁰ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 472, n. 63.

These four names still dominate modern histories of this debate,³¹ which Gibbon presents in much the same terms as those still in use today. In the text to which the footnote just quoted is appended, he says:

At length the eye of criticism and philosophy was directed to the antiquities of France; but even philosophers have been tainted by the contagion of prejudice and passion. The most extreme and exclusive systems, of the personal servitude of the Gauls, or of their voluntary and equal alliance with the Franks, have been rashly conceived, and obstinately defended; and the intemperate disputants have accused each other of conspiring against the prerogatives of the crown, the dignity of the nobles, or the freedom of the people. Yet the sharp conflict has usefully exercised the adverse powers of learning and genius; and each antagonist, alternately vanquished and victorious, has extirpated some ancient errors, and established some interesting truths. An impartial stranger, instructed by their discoveries, their disputes, and even their faults, may describe, from the same original materials, the state of the Roman provincials, after Gaul had submitted to the arms and laws of the Merovingian kings.³²

But the impartial stranger cannot escape seeming to speak of the modern monarchy when discussing the barbaric, or speaking of both in terms coloured by English political culture. The controversy between *thèse nobiliaire* and *thèse royale* is still seen as having begun when Boulainvilliers contended that the *noblesse de l'épée* were the heirs and descendants of the Frankish invaders, who had reduced the Gallo-Romans to servitude and still ruled as their seigneurs by right of conquest. To this Dubos had responded that the Gauls had been the free subjects of the Romans, that the Franks had entered Gaul as the allies of the emperors and their officers, and that Roman law had continued to protect the tenant against reduction to serfdom.³³ It was he who had contended that Clovis's recognition as consul showed him to have exercised the powers of a Roman *princeps* as the foundation of his monarchy in Gaul and Germany; we have seen that Gibbon was sceptical but prepared to accept this in part. Montesquieu, writing from the standpoint of the *noblesse de la robe* as well as *de l'épée* – a position that grew more contentious as relations between the crown and the *parlements* worsened³⁴ – thought that Dubos's ignorance of the law had led him to commit many absurdities, and that the rights of the *noblesses* rested on many foundations, of which the Frankish

³¹ It has an extensive bibliography. For overall studies, see Barzun, 1932; Ford, 1953; Baker, 1990; Smith, 2005; for individual participants, Simon, 1941, and Ellis, 1988 (Boulainvilliers), Carcassonne, 1926?, and Shackleton, 1961 (Montesquieu); Wright 1997 (Mably). The most recent scholarship is perhaps that to be found in Fumaroli and Grell, 2006. I am indebted to Orest Ranum for guidance, as far as I have followed this trail. I have found no modern monograph devoted to Dubos since Lombard, 1913.

³² Womersley, 1994, II, p. 472. ³³ Dubos, 1734, I, 'Discours Préliminaire', *passim*.

³⁴ Ford, 1953.

origins of the monarchy formed one. Though Gibbon was not uncommonly critical of Montesquieu, it is the breadth of his historical outlook that he finds most politically congenial.

Mably, a contemporary of Gibbon's who died in 1785, presents a more complex and dangerous development. The *thèse royale* essentially argued that an absolute monarchy, still exercising powers derived from Roman law and Roman empire, existed and was necessary to protect the rights of the *noblesses* and the *tiers état* alike, and that both Frankish and French history rested on a corresponding narrative. As relations within the regime worsened under Louis XV and XVI, however, this argument became transformed into an indictment of the monarchy for failing to perform that very function and the history of its position between a Roman and a Frankish 'ancient constitution' was rewritten as one of instability and increasing concessions to absolutism and feudal power alike. Gibbon admired the precision of Mably's scholarship – 'the brilliant fancy of the President Montesquieu is corrected by the dry cold reason of the Abbé Mably'³⁵ – but probably did not know that Mably had written a dialogue (not published until 1789) in which an English Milord Stanhope maintains that a French revolution of some kind has become inevitable.³⁶ When he and Gibbon met at the dinner-table of the *académicien* Foncemagne, there occurred an ugly scene at which Mably's theoretical republicanism collided with Gibbon's essentially parliamentary monarchism.³⁷ And Gibbon could not know that within twelve years the Abbé Sièyes's *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers Etat?* was to give the debate an altogether revolutionary turn, in which a nation originally Gallo-Roman seizes control through a national assembly and uses it to overthrow both noble feudalism and a monarchical absolutism that has become the latter's ally.³⁸ Gibbon, like everyone else – even Mably? – had no notion of the revolution we know was coming.

(IV)

Of the four canonical contributors to the debate between the two *thèses*, Gibbon's text seems to interact most with the writings of the Abbé Dubos. This is not to say that he admired him most; Dubos's proposed history is often wildly fanciful, and his legal learning so far behind Montesquieu's as to earn him the latter's scornful dismissal. Nevertheless he was a historian

³⁵ Womersley, 1994, I, p. 243, n. 54; III, p. 1237.

³⁶ 'Des droits et des devoirs du citoyen', published posthumously; Pocock, 1985, p. 256, n. 109.

³⁷ *A*, pp 314–15. ³⁸ Sonenscher, 2003, 2007.

with an acute critical intelligence, and had things to say about the history of the monarchy and of historical writing within it to which Gibbon found it worth replying, not always negatively. His central thesis was that it was false to suppose, as had a long line of authors culminating in Boulainvilliers, that the Franks had carried out a conquest of Roman Gaul and reduced its people to serfdom; false also, in consequence, that the lordships of the *noblesse* and the *seigneurs* were derived from this conquest. To urge the contrary, Dubos contended that the Franks had never been conquerors, and that the Gauls had never been conquered. Even under the successors of Julius Caesar, they had retained their cities and each city its *milice*.³⁹ He therefore interpreted Tacitus in a sense precisely the opposite of Gibbon's, and would clearly have liked to believe that the emperor Honorius's edict had rendered the cities of Gaul consultants of the emperor.⁴⁰ As for the Franks, they had not been a horde of lawless and invading barbarians – he was to be echoed by du Buat on this – but a powerful and partly civilised people, long in occupation of the right bank of the lower Rhine, at times the enemies of Rome in Gaul, at others its allies,⁴¹ e.g. in their resistance to the Vandals in 406–8 and the co-operation of a dominant faction with Aetius against Attila. This explained Anastasius's grant of the consulship to Clovis, which Dubos not only accepted but interpreted as the concession of something like a *merum imperium* – though he does not employ legal terminology and seems to have had little knowledge of its theory – whereby the expanding *monarchie françoise* was essentially a continuation of empire; Clovis ruling over barbarians as well as Romans by imperial authority and the exercise of Roman law.⁴² Dubos saw the last as protecting the proprietor and citizen against the reduction to serfdom which Boulainvilliers had been the last to attribute – falsely – to the Franks ruling as barbarian conquerors and the forebears of the *noblesse*.

These were very high claims indeed, vulnerable in many ways pounced upon by Montesquieu. However, they enabled Dubos to ask questions, to which he gave answers that were in some respects more interesting than the questions themselves. How was it that Boulainvilliers had been able to present a reading of history so much the opposite of the truth as Dubos conceived it, and to win general acceptance? He thought he knew the answer.

³⁹ Dubos, 1734, I ('Livre Premier', separately paginated from the 'Discours Préliminaire' preceding it), pp. 23–30.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 39–40. ⁴¹ Dubos, 1734, 'Discours Préliminaire', pp. 2–3.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

S'il est permis d'user cette expression, voilà l'Histoire de notre Histoire, et comment il est arrivé que l'erreur pris la place de la vérité dans nos Annales.⁴³

[If it is permissible to use the expression, here is the history of our history and of how error took the place of truth in our annals.]

Starting from a pre-modern perception of history as a body of authoritative statements, which must nevertheless be read and interpreted critically, Dubos went on to present a history of historiography as moving through the oral to the scribal and then to the typographic.⁴⁴ The misinterpretation of Frankish history as a narrative of conquest and enslavement had begun when Fredegarius epitomised Gregory of Tours, whom he was as far below as Gregory had been below Polybius;⁴⁵ but the great falsification had occurred under the last Carolingians and the first Capetians (the *deuxième* and the *troisième race*), when the *seigneurs* had risen to power and had interpreted Merovingian history as the foundation of their feudal *droits*. This had been possible in a scribal (and monastic) culture which had lasted from the tenth century to the sixteenth, when texts had been few and of greater authority than they deserved. Only with their multiplication by the invention of printing had it become possible to compare them with one another.⁴⁶ Dubos was open to the criticism that he was writing only of histories, annals and allied literary forms, and was neglecting the archival sources of charters and court records on which historical criticism had been founded even before its perfection by Mabillon; but his reply is that this too was possible only when collections of records, as well as of narratives, had been edited and published and could be compared; possible only, in short, in the age of typography. Until then

Il est très-difficile de composer une bonne Histoire de la France, avec le secours de tous les monumens littéraires du cinquième et du sixième siècle qui nous restent . . . ce qui n'est plus aujourd'hui que difficile, était comme impossible avant l'invention de l'imprimerie, en même avant que tous les monumens dont il est ici question, aussent été non-seulement imprimés, mais encore expliqués et commentés, en un mot, mis par leurs Editeurs dans l'état où nous les avons aujourd'hui, ce qui n'a été achevé que vers l'année mil six cents soixante et dix.⁴⁷

[It is very difficult to write a good history of France with the aid of the surviving literature of the fifth and sixth centuries . . . What today is merely difficult was quite impossible before the invention of printing, and even before all the documents in question here had been not only printed, but explained and commented on; in short, presented by their editors in the condition in which we have them today, a task not completed until about the year 1670.]

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 20. ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 15–16, 43–7. ⁴⁵ p. 16. ⁴⁶ p. 43. ⁴⁷ p. 21.

Fifty years later, however, it had still been possible for Boulainvilliers to advance the thesis of Frankish conquest, and Dubos set out to explain this anomaly. The first sources to be printed, he argued, had been tainted by the false claims made under the Capetians, and the first scholars to take advantage of the new medium had been classical humanists and legists, who could not see the Franks as other than barbarians and had presented them in opposition to the Code and Digest – thus failing to realise that Roman law in its pre-Justinian form had remained in force under Merovingian rule.⁴⁸ Their perpetuation of the conquest thesis could be dispelled only as printed sources multiplied and critical techniques developed; but Dubos's account of this process seems to give primacy to the printing of histories, even though he supplies an imposing list of the *érudits* whose work in several fields had become available by his own time.⁴⁹ He appears unaware of the great jurists of the sixteenth century – Cujas, Hotman, Baudouin, Pasquier – in whom we see 'the foundations of modern historical scholarship',⁵⁰ and says instead that if Adrien de Valois, who began publishing an edition of the French historians in 1646, had revised it before his death in 1692, he might have thought better of his claim that the Franks had conquered Gaul 'l'épée en main'.⁵¹ This, however, was only the beginning of the problem. The Capetian thesis had persisted because it could be overthrown only by the substitution of erudition for narrative:

J'avois en même temps un système reçu à détruire et un nouveau système à établir, que celle d'une Histoire critique. En effet, ce genre d'écrire maintenant assez accredité, permet tout ce que je me trouve dans l'obligation de faire. Il permet d'interrompre souvent sa narration, soit pour examiner la possibilité des faits, et quelle doit être l'autorité de ceux qui les attestent, soit pour rendre raison des motifs qui déterminent à prendre un parti quand on se trouve entre deux Auteurs qui se contredisent, ou bien à concilier ceux qui ne sont opposés l'un à l'autre qu'en apparence, soit enfin pour adopter ou pour refuter les explications que nos Histoires modernes ont donnés aux passages importants de nos anciens Historiens. Il permet enfin tout ce qu'il faut faire en suivant cette méthode si vantée qui mène *du connu à l'inconnu* par voye de raisonnement.

Je n'ignore point que ces discussions fatiguent souvent le lecteur qui trouve bien plus d'agrément dans une Histoire écrite à l'ordinaire, qui, n'interrompant point son narrative que par des réflexions interessantes et courtes, n'employe d'autres preuves que des notes et des citations marginales. Je comparerai même, si l'on veut, toutes les discussions dont l'Histoire Critique est obligé de se changer au harnois qu'endossoient les hommes d'armes des derniers siècles, qui les rendoit presque invulnérables, mais qui leur ôtoit en même tems l'agilité et la bonne grace qu'ils avoient eûs, s'ils n'avoient point été surchargés de fer. Néanmoins étant

⁴⁸ p. 44. ⁴⁹ p. 47. ⁵⁰ Kelley, 1970. ⁵¹ 'Discours Préliminaire', p. 46.

obligé comme je le suis, à detromper et à persuader à la fois, j'ai dû choisir le genre d'écrire le plus propre à convaincre, quoiqu'il fût le moins propre à plaire.⁵²

[I had before me at the same time an established system to destroy and a new one to establish: namely that of a critical history. In the end, this genre of writing, now generally accepted, permits all that I find myself obliged to do. It permits me to interrupt the narrative frequently, whether to examine the possible facts and the authority of those who affirm them; to give an account of the reasons which have led me to choose between two authors who contradict one another, or to reconcile those who only appear to do so; or finally to accept or refute the interpretations given by modern historians to important passages in the ancients. In short, it permits all that one must do in following this method now so highly praised, which leads from the known to the unknown by way of rational argument.

I will not deny that these digressions will often fatigue the reader, who finds more satisfaction in a history written in the usual way, interrupting the narrative only for brief and improving reflections and employing no other apparatus than footnotes and marginal citations. I will even, if I may, compare the digressions with which critical history is obliged to burden itself to the plate armour in which men at arms in recent centuries encased themselves, rendering them almost invulnerable but robbing them of the agility and gracefulness they would have had if they had not been overburdened with steel. Nevertheless, obliged as I am to undeceive and to persuade at the same time, I have been compelled to choose the literary genre which does the most to convince although the least to please.]

These paragraphs conclude the *discours préliminaire* prefixed to Dubos's two volumes. They proclaim a revolution in historiography which is not only a revolution in method, but a transformation of genre, carrying significant political implications. The past history and present structure of the French monarchy can be known only through the practice of a rigorous critical method by skilled *érudits* who communicate with their fellow practitioners, but no longer furnish the narratives expected and enjoyed by the common reader, who understands rhetoric and drama, but is now seen to read, as Gibbon wrote, 'for his amusement'.⁵³ Such a reader can only be instructed in the monarchy's structural history when a new narrative has been framed for his satisfaction, and the time for that has not yet come. The situation is familiar three centuries later, and in 1734 Dubos is left facing the fact that Boulainvilliers can win a public for a history they already know but Dubos is trying to destroy. It was this predicament that he set out to understand and explain. Fourteen years later, Montesquieu observed that if he had thought less about Boulainvilliers and more about the facts, he might have written a better history.⁵⁴ Dubos could have retorted that it was precisely the facts he was

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 55–7. ⁵³ *EEG*, p. 247; *A*, pp. 200, 261.

⁵⁴ *Espirit des Loix*, xxx, 25, the closing paragraph.

seeking to establish through the practice of *histoire critique*; but Montesquieu meant that his preoccupation with Boulainvilliers was leading him to focus on the wrong set of facts, and to draw wrong conclusions from them.

Gibbon in his writings on history was concerned more with the relation of erudition to philosophy than with its relationship with narrative; but the difficulties attending the latter are apparent on almost any page of the *Decline and Fall*, where the need to select a historian as a guide and authority is offset by the need to query his reliability in the text and especially in the footnotes. Much of Gibbon's reputation as an ironist arises from this tension; *l'histoire critique* had not yet overcome *l'histoire écrite à l'ordinaire*, and a grand narrative is accompanied by a swarm of commentators (including the author himself). If we ask where Gibbon stood in relation to the history of French historiography as Dubos perceived it, we may begin by noting that the first footnote to chapter 38 runs:

In this chapter I shall draw my quotations from the *Recueil des Historiens des Gaules et de la France*, Paris, 1738–1767, in eleven columns in folio. By the labour of Dom Bouquet and the other Benedictines –

making themselves useful for once –

the original testimonies, as far as A.D. 1060, are disposed in chronological order, and illustrated with learned notes. Such a national work, which will be continued to the year 1500, might provoke our emulation.⁵⁵

Four years after the publication of the *Histoire Critique*, the Benedictine collection had begun to free historians from the inadequacies of Adrien de Valois and enable them to write the kind of history Dubos had envisaged. In the years after the *Decline and Fall*, Gibbon was to propose an emulative collection of the British historians and to suggest – in vain, which was perhaps fortunate – the Scottish controversialist John Pinkerton as its editor.⁵⁶ As for the revolution in method made possible by typography, Gibbon had this to say.

The Franks, or French, are the only people of Europe who can deduce a perpetual succession from the conquerors of the Western empire. But their conquest of Gaul was followed by ten centuries of anarchy and ignorance. On the revival of learning, the students who had been formed in the schools of Athens and Rome disdained their Barbarian ancestors; and a long time elapsed before patient labor could provide the requisite materials to satisfy, or rather to excite, the curiosity of more enlightened times.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 451, n. 1. ⁵⁶ Trevor-Roper, 2010, ch. 9.

⁵⁷ Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 471–2.

A footnote⁵⁸ here acknowledges the value of Dubos's account of this delay.

At length the eye of criticism and philosophy was directed to the antiquities of France; but . . .

And the passage proceeds as already quoted⁵⁹ to relate the controversy among the rival *thèses*. Where Dubos looked on *l'histoire critique* as a means by which problems might be solved, Gibbon saw it as the birthpoint of controversy, in which both sides might possess part of the truth and only conciliation might reveal the possibility that both were right. There were new dimensions of the debate from Boulainvilliers to Mably that had still to be explored, if doing so was relevant to the purposes of chapter 38.

(V)

To make good his claim that Clovis had ruled as a Roman consul and by imperial authority, Dubos had to present a compatible account of Decline and Fall, meaning the process by which the western empire – here the transalpine provinces – had come to be ruled by barbarian kings. Like Gibbon at one point, but for him more centrally, he went back to Zosimus's account of Constantine's separation between the military and the civil powers of provincial governors, and suggested that the dynasty had been more concerned with domestic rebellion than with barbarian encroachment.⁶⁰ Here he was on delicate ground. Zosimus – and after Dubos Gibbon⁶¹ – had certainly suggested that this separation of powers had weakened provincial resistance to invasion, and the relevant passage in Zosimus was connected with the thesis that the separation of *limitanei* from *comitatenses* had been a further disaster.⁶² Dubos was trying to argue that the cities of Roman Gaul had still had their *milices*, and that the warrior Franks had been their allies – the *comitatenses* to their *limitanei*? – before replacing them altogether. He wished further to argue that Clovis's consulship had reunited the powers separated by Constantine, so that the *monarchie française* had exercised civil as well as military authority, the former according to Roman civil law under a version of Roman empire. There is a passage in book I of the *Histoire Critique* where Dubos seems unsure of his own thesis.

He has been explaining that monarchies typically decline and fall because of *conformations*, by which term he appears to mean constellations of moral and social forces beyond the monarchy's control.⁶³ It is the

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, n. 63. ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 472. ⁶⁰ Dubos, 1734, book 1, new pagination, p. 92.

⁶¹ Above, pp. 33–34. ⁶² Above, p. 36. ⁶³ I have found no English equivalent to this word.

diversity, not the unity, of the realm which necessitates the absolutism of his authority, but at the same time renders it precarious.

Nous avons vû quel étoit le vice de *conformation* de l'Empire Romain.

But have we? Dubos seems to mean both its proneness to military rebellion, and the questionable effect of Constantine's separation of powers.

Ainsi l'on ne doit point être surpris de tout ce qui firent Constantin et ses successeurs pour rémédier aux maux qui étoient l'effet de ce vice. Leurs précautions ont-elles avancé la ruine de la Monarchie Romaine?

Zosimus clearly thought so; or

l'ont-elles reculée? Je n'en sçais rien. Peut-être même que les Romains qui vivoient au commencement du sixième siècle, et qui voyoient de peu près le progrès du mal et les effets du remede, étoient d'un sentiment opposé sur cette question. Peut-être les uns soutenoient-ils que les remedes appliqués par Constantin aux maux résultans du vice de *conformation* de l'Empire n'eussent servi qu'à leur faire faire un progrès plus prompt, tandis que d'autres pretendoient que l'Empire dût à ces remedes le peu de vie qui lui restoit encore.⁶⁴

[We have seen what form the disease of *conformation* took in the Roman empire; so we should not be surprised by the measures Constantine and his successors took to remedy the evils which followed from it. Did their prescriptions hasten the ruin of the Roman monarchy, or did they delay it? I really do not know. Perhaps even the Romans who lived at the beginning of the sixth century, and saw at close range the progress of the disease and the effects of the remedy, were of opposed opinions on this question. Perhaps some held that Constantine's prescriptions for the cure of the evils resulting from this *conformation* of the empire had served only to make their progress more rapid, while others claimed that the empire owed to them the little life that remained to it.]

Whatever he may have been as a scholar, Dubos was a sensitive historian, aware that his thoughts had been those of others. In this passage on Decline and Fall, he is on the hinge between 'fall' and 'transformation', insistent that barbarians might have been invited and even allies as well as invaders, but conscious that even when the former they substituted their own authority for that of the emperor. The proposition that Clovis was a consul meant that he ruled over Visigoths and Burgundians, as well as Franks, by Roman authority; so that no Germanic people could have exercised a right of conquest over the still Roman Gauls. The controversy in which he was engaged, however, arose when Franks – or rather, a *noblesse* claiming descent from them – asserted that such a conquest had

⁶⁴ Dubos, 1734, book 1, pp. 92–3.

taken place, so that they ruled over an enserved population, and that their relations with subsequent kings of all three races had been regulated by Frankish custom rooted in conquest, by which serfdom for some and liberty for others had been ensured. It was here that the debate over the *monarchie française* became a debate over the structure of the Bourbon monarchy in the eighteenth century, in which Dubos took part and of which Gibbon was aware. Clovis and the Franks remained relevant to it.

There had been no Frankish conquest because the Roman character of Gaul had continued under Clovis and his successors. This did not mean that the Gallo-Romans had entered into any treaty or contract with the Franks. Dubos was an absolutist, not a proponent of 'Gothic' or 'Germanic' liberty. As Clovis expanded the *monarchie* to include Armoricans, Burgundians and Visigoths, as well as Franks east and west of the Rhine, he had done so by the simple exercise of a Roman *imperium* which was now his and only nominally that of Anastasius in distant Constantinople. This, Dubos was understood to mean, was the key to a history passing from 'Frankish' to 'French'. Though not a jurist, he was aware of the regional diversity of French legal systems: *droit écrit*, *droit coutumier*, *ratio scripta*; but insisted that it was the ultimately Roman authority of the kings which had brought them together in a common system. *Les rois avaient fait la France*.

He therefore denied both conquest and contract as the foundations of monarchy, and saw the advent of feudal *seigneurs* under the late Carolingians and early Capetians as the source of the false history Boulainvilliers was still propounding. His reading is the polar opposite of the English 'ancient constitution' – when he uses the term he means monarchical sovereignty – since what was advanced against it was neither custom, contract, nor Gothic liberty, but an aggregate of feudal rights founded in a conquest which had never occurred but had been invented by Carolingian *seigneurs*. His history of historiography records the persistence of this myth; yet he is not a historian of sixteenth-century controversy; instead, he dismisses the period of the Wars of Religion as that of a distraction from the issue of a true *histoire critique*.⁶⁵

It is here that we encounter the extraordinary vehemence of Montesquieu's rejection of Dubos.⁶⁶ He regularly accused Dubos of relying on histories and poems where he should have been studying law-books and the records of courts; a species of literature which lay among the foundations of Montesquieu's thought as both *érudit* and *philosophe*.

⁶⁵ 'Discourse Préliminaire', p. 45.

⁶⁶ The most recent study of this confrontation may be found in Sonenscher 2007, pp. 134–8.

Above all, he knew more than the Abbé about the diversity of French law, customary, civil and regional, and about the complex and gradual processes which had brought all these systems under royal sovereignty. These were processes in which both *nobles* – including the *robe* to which he belonged – had played their part, and in which the mechanisms of society and history might be seen at work. Compared with the complexities of legal history as Montesquieu knew them, Dubos's system might appear an intolerable over-simplification; and it may be this that accounts for the sustained fury – no other word seems applicable – with which the *Esprit des Lois* (1748) deals with the Abbé, who had in fact been dead for six years. Their readings of history, says Montesquieu, are totally incompatible; and in a sequence of twelve chapters⁶⁷ he sets out the interminable list of occasions on which 'M. l'abbé Dubos' is wrong and the reasons why he is. This is *furor scholasticus*, compared with which mere ideological disagreements may be as nothing; but Gibbon knew that he was entering on a controversy affecting both contemporary perceptions of the French monarchy, and the character the *Decline and Fall* was assuming. He was entering on a history of the post-Roman west, involving change in the ways history was written; and we must ask why he did this in a chapter which further postponed his treatment of east Roman history. We cannot address this question, however, without first studying his account of the Frankish monarchy.

(VI)

The problem in its simplest form was whether the Frankish monarchy, and by association other kingdoms of the west, had been ruled by Roman or by barbaric law; the latter perceived either as Gothic liberty or as the origin of feudal tenures. As Dubos had shown, no simple answer was possible; if the power of the nobility over their serfs did not originate in the Frankish conquest, the myth that it had was the work of late Carolingians exploiting an account of Frankish and Germanic law. Such laws – there were many of them – had been customary in character, and therefore distinct from imperial or royal authority. Boulainvilliers had insisted on what we should call an 'ancient constitution' (though one based on a 'feudal law' following a Frankish conquest); Dubos had insisted that all law, even custom, depended on a royal authority originally and essentially Roman; Montesquieu had been infuriated by Dubos's refusal to recognise the diversity of French legal systems – royal and customary, Roman and

⁶⁷ *Esprit des Lois*, book xxx, chs. 23–35.

barbarian – or the vast complexity of the history of France arising from them. Gibbon's treatment – a rapid survey of the rival positions and the histories they entailed – seems closest to Montesquieu's. He accepts some of Mably's criticisms without necessarily pursuing them where they may lead.

Following a passage already quoted, he accepts the initial, but short-lived, primacy of orally transmitted custom.

The rudest, or the most servile, condition of human society, is regulated however by some fixed and general rules. When Tacitus surveyed the primitive simplicity of the Germans, he discovered some permanent maxims, or customs of public and private life, which were preserved by faithful tradition till the introduction of the art of writing; and of the Latin tongue.⁶⁸

Here we have Gibbon writing *en philosophe*, recognising what we may accurately perceive of a pre-literate society which cannot inform us about itself and has difficulty retaining its own memories. The reader may turn back to chapter 9 of the *Decline and Fall*, where he had insisted that the lack of letters and money was the reason why Tacitus's Germans had not been a civilised society, or to his refusal to believe that an oral culture could retain and perfect an epic poem.⁶⁹ He will not therefore accept the myth of custom, whereby usage and memory affix on a culture a 'second nature' it can hardly shake off. To him customs become laws only when they are reduced to writing, and Tacitean customs became the *leges barbarorum* only as the Germanic people entered a Roman – and, chapter 37 has informed us, a Christian – cultural world, in which customs could be reduced to writing by the consensus of the tribal elders and the increasingly Roman authority of the kings. He tells us how this had happened among the Salian Franks, followed by the Ripuarians in Germany and successively by the Alamanni, Visigoths and Burgundians as these became incorporated in the Frankish monarchy.⁷⁰ It takes a king to create an ancient constitution based on custom, and *leges non scriptae* must be reduced to writing before it can be recognised that their authority is older than that invention. Gibbon does not say this, but any reader acquainted with the common law would know he meant it. What might the *Decline and Fall* have become if he had remained in Oxford and studied Blackstone?

This process continued into the sixth century; so that

by a singular coincidence, the Germans framed their artless institutions at a time when the elaborate system of Roman jurisprudence was finally consummated. In

⁶⁸ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 472. ⁶⁹ *BSE*, ch. 5. ⁷⁰ Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 472–4.

the Salic laws, and the Pandects of Justinian, we may compare the first rudiments, and the full maturity, of civil wisdom; and whatever prejudices may be suggested in favour of Barbarism, our calmer reflections will ascribe to the Romans the superior advantages, not only of science and reason, but of humanity and justice. Yet the laws of the Barbarians were adapted to their wants and desires, their occupations and their capacity;

– a rather grudging admission that the customs of a people may become part of their nature –

and they all contributed to preserve the peace, and promote the improvement of the society for whose use they were originally established⁷¹

We may look ahead, as perhaps Gibbon was doing, to chapter 44 in volume IV, where he produced a history and survey of Roman jurisprudence culminating in the Codes and Digests of Justinian as the crowning achievement of his reign. That chapter, however, contains the warning, met earlier in Gibbon's account of the *Codex Theodosianus*,⁷² that systems of imperial law may originate in despotism and culminate in corruption. There might be tensions between Roman and barbaric notions of property, liberty and even justice; but Gibbon's immediate concern is to exhibit the two kinds of law in the making of a society already post-Roman but not yet post-barbaric. It is here, furthermore, that he announces his need, and his discovery, of a systematic study of German law, which he finds in the works of Heineccius.⁷³ It is his first venture into a German history no longer ancient; but he does not develop it further.

His account of law in the barbaric kingdoms is, initially at least, neither absolutist nor constitutionalist, but dwells upon the presence of the barbaric in a society in many ways – ecclesiastical as well as civil – still Roman. The Merovingian kings permitted, or obliged, each individual to be judged by the law under which he had been born or which he chose to declare his own; 'nor were the Romans excluded from the common benefits of this legal toleration'⁷⁴ – a word resonant when used by Gibbon. But problems obviously arose, and he goes on to write at some length about the continuance of such barbaric usages as trial by combat and ordeal.⁷⁵ They were encouraged to persist by the phenomenon already noticed by Dubos, whereby

the civil and military professions, which had been separated by Constantine, were again united by the Barbarians ... and the same officer assumed, within his district, the command of the troops and the administration of justice.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 473. ⁷² Above, p. 32. ⁷³ Womersley, 1994, III, p. 1224.

⁷⁴ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 474. ⁷⁵ pp. 474–6.

But this was barbaric improvisation; it restored neither the stability of empire nor the versatility of republican virtue; and

The fierce and illiterate chieftain was seldom qualified to discharge the duties of a judge, which require all the faculties of a philosophic mind, laboriously cultivated by experience and study,

and hardly to be looked for in Merovingian Gaul. Instead:

his rude ignorance was compelled to embrace some simple and visible methods of ascertaining the cause of justice,

such as trials by combat and ordeal as appeals to the *judicium Dei*.⁷⁶ We are not looking at the re-militarisation of empire, but at the rule of a warrior class; and Gibbon proceeds to look at those provinces where warriors were quartered upon landholders. He does not think that this necessarily led to a decline in either property or productivity.

In these districts each Barbarian was connected by the ties of hospitality with some Roman provincial. To this unwelcome guest the proprietor was compelled to abandon two-thirds of his patrimony; but the German, a shepherd and a hunter,

still an invader from the Scythian world of stadial history,

might sometimes content himself with a spacious range of wood and pasture, and resign the smallest, though most valuable, portion to the toil of the industrious husbandman.⁷⁷

The more far-sighted kings, such as Clovis, might understand that it was in their interest that the process of quartering was regulated by something in the nature of law. Gibbon devotes pages to the darkest aspects of the establishment of the barbarian kingdoms: the growth of a lawless *seigneurie* who converted tracts of land into game preserves set aside to gratify their pastoral passion for hunting; their wars and razzias in search of slaves who had not the security even of serfs; the process by which the *beneficium*, originally a tenancy at will,

was gradually abolished by the independent and rapacious nobles of France who established the perpetual property and hereditary succession of their benefices; a revolution

– Gibbon unexpectedly adds –

salutary to the earth, which had been injured or neglected by its precarious masters.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ pp. 476–8. ⁷⁷ p. 479. ⁷⁸ p. 480.

Nothing quite does away with the legal basis of the process of feudalisation, or the duality, not to say multiplicity, of the laws that remain in force. Gibbon can conclude this part of chapter 38:

We are now qualified to despise the opposite, and perhaps artful, misrepresentations which have softened or exaggerated the oppression of the Romans of Gaul under the reign of the Merovingians. The conquerors –

he does not hesitate to call them that –

never promulgated any *universal* law of servitude or confiscation –

so much for Boulainvilliers –

but a degenerate people, who excused their weakness by the specious names of politeness and peace, was exposed to the arms and laws of the ferocious Barbarians, who contemptuously insulted their possessions, their freedom, and their safety. Their personal injuries were partial and irregular; but the great body of the Romans survived the revolution and still preserved the property and privileges of citizens. A large portion of their lands was exacted for the use of the Franks; but they enjoyed the remainder exempt from tribute; and the same irresistible violence which swept away the arts and manufactures of Gaul destroyed the elaborate and expensive system of Imperial despotism.

The groundwork of Roman society is surviving the over-taxation which has been a cause of its decline.

The provincials must frequently deplore the savage jurisprudence of the Salian or Riparian laws; but their private life, in the important concerns of marriage, testaments, or inheritance, was still regulated by the Theodosian Code –

a significant if limited concession to Dubos.

The fierce and illiterate Barbarians were excluded, during several generations, from the dignities, and even the orders, of the church. The clergy of Gaul consisted almost entirely of native provincials; the haughty Franks fell prostrate at the feet of their subjects who were dignified with the episcopal character; and the power and riches which had been lost in war were insensibly recovered by superstition . . . The Romans communicated to their conquerors the use of the Christian religion and Latin language; but their language and their religion had alike degenerated from the simple purity of the Augustan and Apostolic age –

as unlikely a pair of epithets as can be found anywhere in Gibbon.

The progress of superstition and Barbarism was rapid and universal; the worship of the saints concealed from vulgar eyes the God of the Christians, and the rustic dialect of peasants and soldiers was corrupted by a Teutonic idiom and pronunciation. Yet such intercourse of sacred and social communion eradicated the distinctions of birth and victory; and the nations of

Gaul were gradually confounded under the name and government of the Franks.⁷⁹

Not, however, the culture they had brought with them as conquering Germans. This ethnically diverse nation might, thinks Gibbon, have developed into a constitutional monarchy, where the king accepted the advice of his estates on law and taxation; but 'the nation was separated and almost dissolved by the conquest of Gaul', the king had no regular means of establishing his government, and the Franks decayed into that mixture of barbarism and decadence tediously recounted by Gregory of Tours.⁸⁰

A footnote reference to Mably adds the remark: 'It would seem that the institution of national assemblies, which are coeval with the French nation, has never been congenial to its temper.'⁸¹ What Gibbon thought of these words a decade later we have no means of knowing; but his last words on the history he has been relating are:

It has been reserved for the same nation to expose, by their intemperate vices, the most odious abuse of freedom, and to supply its loss by the spirit of honour and humanity which now alleviates and dignifies their obedience to an absolute sovereign.⁸²

This Montesquieuan conclusion did not satisfy the English Whig Gibbon had become and was to lose its force in France almost from the moment of its publication. The fact that he has had no recourse but to arrive at it highlights the further question of what place it has, appearing where it does, in the history of his composition of the *Decline and Fall*.

(VII)

Though volume III is concluding with a group of loosely connected essays, the sections of chapter 38 we have been studying present a massive historical thesis. The western empire has long been divided by the line of the Alps separating Italy from Gaul, and the usurpers who have from time to time seized power in the further west have had their successors in the crossing of the Rhine; the Visigoths and now the Franks. Gibbon is holding in reserve the history of the Ostrogothic kingdom of Italy, which will be a central theme of the age of Justinian; but Frankish history is already enabling him to look ahead to two further narratives. As the Merovingian line gives place to the Carolingian, Maslov's introduction opens up the increasingly German history of the medieval empire, shaped by the papal appeal to Charlemagne in consequence of Justinian's failure to reincorporate west with east, and Gibbon will be able to embark on the

⁷⁹ pp. 487–9. ⁸⁰ pp. 489–90. ⁸¹ p. 490, n. 120. ⁸² *Ibid.*

second period, and so on the third, of his original scheme. This will be an Italian and a European history; but as the Frankish narrative passes to the Carolingian period and beyond, we are directed to the Capetian 'third race' ruling a Frankish Gaul which never forms part of the Germanic empire; and with Dubos and his opponents, we enter on a history of the *monarchie française* still being angrily debated in the years before and after 1789. Gibbon is discovering – or rather rediscovering – the history of the west, medieval and early modern, in which he himself lives and his historical outlook is shaped: the history, that is, of the great Atlantic monarchies – France, Britain and Spain – which has to be written as a history of debate over their legal and constitutional structures, conceived as a debate between their Roman and their barbarian components. The history of the 'nation state', whether historians like it or not, begins here. The history of the further, and even of the Germanic, west must be a history of laws and constitutions, and the disciplines of legal history have long been shaping the historiography in which Gibbon must engage as he leaves the history of Rome behind him. This enterprise, however, has little to do with the history of the eastern empire; Justinian's codification has more effect in Latin history than in Byzantine.

Chapter 38, therefore, begins Gibbon's possible metamorphosis into a medieval historian; but the history it introduces lies west of the imperial and east Roman history he is committed to writing. It is, however, the history in which he lives and from which he delivers his understanding of what history is and how it can be written. The opening chapters of volume IV conduct him and his reader into the history of Justinian and the east, but though they must have been in his mind as he concluded the preceding volume, they were not published until 1788 and must be studied as part of the corpus of historical writing that appeared then. They cannot be examined, though they cannot be altogether forgotten, as *Barbarism and Religion* concludes its study of 'the first Decline and Fall'. All that will here be attempted is an account of how Gibbon completed his presentation of a far-western and post-Roman history by excluding from it those former provinces which did not form part of the *monarchie française*.

There are the modern kingdoms of Spain and Britain; the latter now beginning a new history which will be that of England. Of the former, that is the Visigothic kingdoms which the Franks do not acquire together with Aquitaine, Gibbon says that

The historian of the Roman empire is neither invited nor compelled to pursue the obscure and barren series of their annals,

and adds that they had no historian of their own to rank with Gregory of Tours or Bede.⁸³ In fact, however, he supplies a history of Spain before the Arab conquests which contrasts interestingly with that otherwise available. To Robertson in his *History of Charles V*, it seemed that medieval Spain's was a history of arrested development; the proto-feudalism of the Goths and Vandals was frozen in place by the Muslim practice of toleration, and emerged unchanged from the *reconquista* to be converted into absolute monarchy by Ferdinand of Aragon.⁸⁴ To Raynal, this explained why the conquest of Spanish America was carried out by a nation of economic primitives.⁸⁵ Gibbon tells, and then abandons, a different story. The Gothic nobility accepted the guidance of a republic of bishops, who

respected themselves, and were respected by the public; their indissoluble union disguised their vices, and confirmed their authority; and the regular discipline of the church introduced peace, order and stability into the government of the state;

not, to put it mildly, the account of clerical rule we are accustomed to expect of Gibbon. From the first to the last of the post-Arian Visigothic kings, the bishops presided over a series of councils held at Toledo, where, though they

laboured with diligence and success to kindle the flames of persecution, and to exalt the mitre above the crown . . . the free spirit of the Barbarians . . . tempered and guided by episcopal policy . . . established some prudent laws for the common benefit of the king and people.

A regular succession of kings reigned over 'a powerful aristocracy'; and, most remarkably of all, set about a codification in which

As long as the Visigoths themselves were satisfied with the rude customs of their ancestors, they indulged their subjects of Aquitain and Spain in the enjoyment of the Roman law. Their gradual improvement in arts, in policy, and at length in religion, encouraged them to imitate and to supersede these foreign institutions, and to compose a code of civil and criminal jurisprudence for the use of a great and united people. The same institution and the same privileges were communicated to the nations of the Spanish monarchy; and the conquerors, insensibly renouncing the Teutonic idiom, submitted to the restraints of equity, and exalted the Romans to the participation of freedom.⁸⁶

The Spaniards appear to have succeeded where the Franks and Romans failed. Gibbon acknowledges the help of the Benedictines in recovering this idyll, and defends it against the attacks of Montesquieu.⁸⁷ He tells us

⁸³ p. 491 and n. 122. ⁸⁴ Robertson, 1824, III, pp. 142–4, 150–8.

⁸⁵ *BSE*, pp. 275–6.

⁸⁶ Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 491–3. Note the use of 'equity'.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, n. 125.

nothing in this chapter of how the system fared under Moorish rule or during the *reconquista*; but nothing could be less like the narrative of Robertson, in which the recovery of every kingdom saddles the crown with a new and turbulent nobility, compelling a new assertion of royal absolutism.⁸⁸ This does not appear in Robertson's narrative until the reign of Ferdinand of Aragon.

What Visigothic Spain lacks in Gibbon is a history of debate over the encounter between Roman and barbaric law. He now turns to Britain, where no such encounter takes place.

(VIII)

In these concluding chapters, we have seen Gibbon beginning to construct a post-Roman history of the transalpine sector of the former empire, leaving that of Gothic Italy and the Byzantine east to be presented in a future volume. This history has been increasingly and predominantly that of a Frankish kingdom extending southward through Gaul to the borders of Spain and eastward by a counter-historical movement into barbaric Germany. He now terminates chapter 38 by presenting an account of the last of the three great dioceses into which that sector had been divided: an account of Britain as lying altogether outside the history he has begun to construct.

We have learnt of a series of decisions, taken successively by Stilicho, Honorius and Aetius, whereby the legions were withdrawn from Britain and the provincials told to conduct their own defence against barbarians arriving by sea. The effect has been that there is no attempt to maintain a Roman structure or to assimilate barbarians to it; the North Sea and Hadrian's wall do not constitute *limites* across which the processes of *receptio* go on. Constantine named 'the third', raised to the purple by the army in Britain, pursues empire to his death at Visigothic hands in Gaul; but apart from an emigration of Romano-Britons into the west of Armorica, Britain is unaffected by what he does. In consequence, there is no historian nor body of historical documents to provide Britain with a post-Roman history; there is no Jordanes or Gregory and no laws of the Franks or the Visigoths; and for that reason the island lies virtually outside history itself as Gibbon understands the term. He says:

since Britain was already separated from the Roman empire, I might without reproach decline a story familiar to the most illiterate, and obscure to the most learned, of my readers.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Robertson, 1824. ⁸⁹ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 493.

There are poetic and popular legends, and there are fragmentary histories by monks. Gibbon's contempt for the last leads him to say of Gildas that 'in the profound ignorance of human life [he] has presumed to exercise the office of historian',⁹⁰ and it is difficult to maintain that Gibbon thought much more highly of the laborious and scholarly Bede⁹¹ – an omission that may need explaining.

'Yet', he continues,

the historian of the empire may be tempted to pursue the revolutions of a Roman province till it vanishes from his sight; and an Englishman may curiously trace the establishment of the Barbarians from whom he derives his name, his laws, and perhaps his origin.⁹²

In the absence of any historian of authority – so Gibbon would have us believe – he is reduced to narrating the familiar if obscure story of Vortigern, Hengist and Horsa, the sea raiders of the Saxon shore, whom the first-named fatally invites into the island to support him against 'the Caledonian invaders'. They ravage the Orkneys – we are so far in northern latitudes – and establish a colony on the coast of Northumbria. This, however, soon disappears from history, and the narrative becomes that of the establishment of the Heptarchy, a set of kingdoms more Saxon than Angle, though the latter name becomes that of the Roman province which one of Gibbon's sources is already calling 'England'. For Gibbon has more sources here than he admits, and they are moderns engaged in the controversial reconstruction of post-Roman history. It is curious that David Hume and the first volume of his *History of England* remain unmentioned among them, since Gibbon admired him above any other historian of England and any British historian but Robertson. We might suppose that Gibbon was moved by his fear, long ago expressed, of becoming involved in the fierce partisanship of English historiography, were it not for the robust engagement in controversy that marks the two modern historians he does cite: 'the laborious Mr. Carte and the ingenious Mr Whitaker'.⁹³ Both have figured in these volumes already (Whitaker but a few chapters ago), and both put forward views relevant to, though very different from, the debate over Frankish history of such significance to Gibbon. Both also were historians of Britain, rather than England alone, and both held positions regarding the Saxons as invaders of Roman Britain which looked back to the biblical prehistory found in the older chronologies.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 496. ⁹¹ p. 493: 'the ecclesiastical tales of the venerable Bede'. ⁹² p. 494.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, n. 127.

Carte,⁹⁴ an English Jacobite whose *History of England* had appeared in 1747, was a historian of the post-diluvian expansion of the sons of Noah, much concerned with the differentiation of agricultural from shepherd peoples, notably in the Caledonian highlands. He was, further, a seventeenth-century survival who admired both Dr Robert Brady and Sir Robert Filmer before him, and had presented patriarchal kingship as the normal condition of gentile or barbarian society. Clans had settled on the land and become colonies; in all of them, lands were held of a lord by tenants free or unfree, and the king was no more than a later version of the primitive chief or patriarch. The conquest of one people by another might reduce the former to serfdom, but their social structure before conquest had not been significantly different. The ‘Gothic’ peoples had brought it with them into the Roman provinces, and the Britons, Picts and Scots had practised it before it was imposed upon them in their turn by the Angles and Saxons. There was not, therefore, that antithesis between ‘ancient constitution’ and ‘feudal law’ so radically obvious to English Whigs in the seventeenth century, and the ‘Gothic’ liberty inherited by Europeans had originally been the rights of lords over serfs. There was no great difference – other than Carte’s scriptural fundamentalism – between his thesis and that of Boulainvilliers or any Polish or Hungarian nobleman still advancing it in the eighteenth century. Goths, Sarmatians and Scythians might be all one in history.

John Whitaker, as Colin Kidd has shown,⁹⁵ held essentially the same positions, but was able to use them more whiggishly in repudiating the idea of a Norman conquest of England; none had been necessary to the introduction of dependent tenures, and how the rights of lords had been extended to the rights of proprietors and freemen was a story of its own. What caught Gibbon’s eye, and should be considered in any study, was Whitaker’s place in a history of historiography. He offered, not a history of England, but a four-volume *History of Manchester*, completed in 1775, in which he presented his north-western (and still pre-industrial) city as a point around which the vortices of British and even Irish history could be seen revolving. Drawing on the county histories appearing in his time, in which the traditions of sixteenth-century topography and chorography were becoming modern, he occasionally made use of evidence we should call archaeological to support his accounts of what was happening in history not only Anglo-British but archipelagic. It was the coast of north-west Britain that had been regularly exposed to Scottish invasions, originating in an Ireland that had been settled from Britain. In his debates

⁹⁴ *BSE*, ch. 4. ⁹⁵ Kidd, 1999, pp. 95–6.

with James Macpherson⁹⁶ we have seen specimens of the controversial ferocity that he was to deploy against Gibbon, and which ultimately ruined his career and reputation.

It has been argued⁹⁷ that insofar as Gibbon followed the history laid down by Carte and Whitaker, he passed the test now required of historians and presented Anglo-British history as part of a European process. In this scheme, laid down by Adam Smith in the *Wealth of Nations* and probably in the writings destroyed at his death,⁹⁸ the invading barbarians, uniformly shepherd peoples, established themselves as a military nobility and reduced the peasants of western Europe, many of them already unfree, to varying degrees of serfdom. It took something like a thousand years to undo this process, but the chief agents in achieving that were the trading cities that had survived the barbarian conquest, and the church persisting as a republic of bishops. Gibbon, the argument runs, followed Carte and Whitaker in repeating this process in the concluding sections of chapter 38. There is, however, a counter-thesis that may be advanced and will modify the account of Gibbon just suggested. The controversy over the *monarchie française* revolved around the extent to which Roman law, codified by Theodosius II and by Justinian, had continued to obtain, had entered into dialogue with the newly codified barbarian customs, and had made the authority of barbarian kings at least partly Roman. This was the much-debated and highly controversial history of Frankish Gaul and (while it survived) Visigothic Spain; and this, a significant modification of Smith's, was the history of post-Roman Europe discovered and revealed by Gibbon at the close of volume III. It is not the advent of feudalism, but its debate with Roman authority surviving Roman empire, that shapes the history of the post-Roman Atlantic west.

From this narrative the histories of Britain and of England are altogether excluded. No British or Saxon king rules as a Roman consul or patrician, and no body of Roman law competes with the codified customs of the Angles, Saxons or Scots. For this reason the shape of British history, and its historiography, are sharply different from the European narrative. In Britain and England, as in Gaul and Spain, 'ancient constitution' and 'feudal law' are interchangeable terms at the period of barbarian establishment. When they became antithetical and bitterly opposed, the historical events to which debaters referred were not those of the sixth century but of the eleventh. It was not a barbarian conquest over Romans that was

⁹⁶ Above, p. 242. ⁹⁷ Kidd, 1999, pp. 228–9.

⁹⁸ Hont, 'Adam Smith's history of law and government as political theory', in Bourke and Geuss, 2009, esp. pp. 155–66.

debated, but a Norman conquest over Englishmen;⁹⁹ and a Saxon 'ancient constitution' of freeholders¹⁰⁰ was opposed to a 'feudal law' brought in by Normans and centred upon the person of their king. The history of post-Roman Europe had begun five centuries before the English and the British became part of it.

There is in fact no history – other than the rhetoric of Gothicism – into which the history of Britain can be fitted, and no history of Britain in the age of the English conquest generated by them. As we have seen, there are no British historians worth the name – we may want to accuse Gibbon of doing less than justice to Bede – and therefore no narrative worth critical reconstitution; and there are no bodies of law, until later, which can furnish a historiography independent of narrative, or out of whose conflicts a new kind of narrative can be constructed. This period in British history is correctly termed a 'dark age', not because it was bloody and barbaric but because it is unknown to the historian through any of the writings from which he is able to construct a narrative. We are forced back on traditions, legends and romances, and must do what we can with them.

What emerges, under the pressures of an exiguous tradition, is a history heavily slanted towards the south of the island. Gibbon does not use the *History of Manchester* to develop a view of the Saxon or Angle expansion through the midlands or the north, and we are left with the 'familiar yet obscure' story of the slow Saxon advance up the Thames valley and on to the valley of the Severn, at which point the surviving Britons withdrew, in considerable strength, into what will become known as Wales and Cornwall. This conquest is no genocide. The subjugated Britons survive as serfs and villeins to English lords, and Gibbon happily joins Whitaker in refuting an ill-judged remark of Samuel Johnson's by supplying a formidable list of British words which have become part of the English language.¹⁰¹ These Britons, however, are no longer Romans. They have lost their cities and their bishops, the two main agencies of civilised survival, and though Gibbon makes much of their western refuges in Wales, Cornwall and beyond the seas in Brittany, it is hard for him to avoid suggesting that they have regressed to a heroic and druidic culture barbaric in its own way.¹⁰² What is perhaps curious is that, though he possessed a copy of Archbishop Usher's *Britannicarum ecclesiarum antiquitates*,¹⁰³ he shows no interest in the vision of a western and archipelagic

⁹⁹ Pocock, 1957, 1987.

¹⁰⁰ How the pre-Conquest English kingdom came to be seen as pre-feudal is a question Gibbon might have asked but did not.

¹⁰¹ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 502, n. 144. *Ibid.*, p. 504.

¹⁰² Womersley, 1994, II, p. 501. ¹⁰³ *Library*, p. 272.

Christianity ruled by colleges of priests rather than by bishops and certainly not by popes. If he knew about the Irish saints (he was certainly aware of Patrick), they may have reminded him of the monks of the Egyptian desert.

The kings of France maintained the privileges of their Roman subjects; but the ferocious Saxons trampled on the laws of Rome and the emperors. The proceedings of civil and criminal jurisdiction, the titles of honour, the forms of office, the ranks of society, and even the domestic rights of marriage, testament, and inheritance, were finally suppressed; and the indiscriminate crowd of noble and plebeian slaves was governed by the traditional customs which had been coarsely framed for the shepherds and pirates of Germany.¹⁰⁴

These were only formed into laws by the later kings of Wessex, Ina and Alfred. Gibbon is no believer in Gothic liberties or the ancient constitution; but what is of more immediate importance is his explicit exclusion of Britain and England from the history debated by Dubos and Montesquieu, in which Roman law survives and competes with customs early reduced to written law. If this is a central theme of post-Roman European history, the island and the archipelago do not belong to it.

With the disappearance of laws, cities and a correspondence of bishops, goes the disappearance of a cultured class capable of writing Latin. If Britain has no history in its dark age, it is because it has no historians; English history is supplied by monks, that of the Britons in the remoter west by Welsh bards suitable to a resurgent barbarism.¹⁰⁵ Gibbon is unable to read their lays when printed,¹⁰⁶ and about the Ossianic unreliability of an oral culture his views are nearer to Whitaker's than to Carte's. There remains the multiform and persistent legend of Arthur. Modern criticism doubts his existence, though Whitaker has done what he can to re-establish him as a hero of the long British retreat. Gibbon knows, however, that the legend as he has it is medieval, Norman and Welsh before it was Norman and English,¹⁰⁷ and he cites Thomas Warton's *History of English Poetry*,¹⁰⁸ reminding us that historiography is still a branch of the study of literature.

If Greco-Roman historical culture has disappeared from the Anglo-British dark ages – we are not told here what brought it back – Britain has correspondingly disappeared from visibility in that culture where it survives in the Roman east. Gibbon effectively concludes chapter 38 with the account given by Procopius, 'the gravest historian of the times', of the fabulous island of Brittia, 'less than thirty miles from the continent',

¹⁰⁴ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 501. Observe the uneasy association of 'pirates' with 'shepherds'.

¹⁰⁵ pp. 504–5. ¹⁰⁶ p. 500, n. 140. ¹⁰⁷ pp. 500–1. ¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, n. 141.

divided by a wall east of which ‘the Frisians, the Angles, and the Britons’ form ‘a civilised people’, while the west is a Hades inhabited by departed spirits, transplanted by Frankish boatmen performing the office of Charon. A footnote makes it clear that Procopius endeavoured to distinguish fabulous Brittia from real Britain; it is not that the Greek historian believed the legend, but that he had no other evidence to relate.¹⁰⁹ Britain has dropped off the screen of history because the Anglo-Saxons have forgotten the arts of navigation and neglected those of commerce

and the *British world* was seldom connected, either in peace or war, with the nations of the continent.¹¹⁰

With this moderately Eurosceptical conclusion Gibbon brings chapter 38 to its end, adding only a paragraph pointing to the volumes to follow. He says nothing introductory of the *General Observations* that are immediately appended. The function of the chapter seems to have been the establishment of a history lying in the far west of Europe, looking occasionally to the eastward expansion of Germanic power towards the Vistula. This history is Frankish, not Gothic, and will be only indirectly affected by Justinian’s overthrow of Theodoric’s kingdom in Italy; a narrative which Gibbon soon began to write. It establishes a main theme of secular history in the medieval west, the conflicts and contentions between Roman law and barbaric custom, and therefore between the concepts of kingship that go with them; but Gibbon has yet to say anything about the rise and role of the Roman church. He has made it his business to say that barbaric English culture as it emerged from Roman-British had no part in the history French scholars were debating; and how far all this is related to the history of the eastern empire, to which he must soon turn, we have yet no means of knowing.

¹⁰⁹ pp. 505–6 and n. 161. ¹¹⁰ p. 507; Gibbon’s emphasis.

23 The *General Observations*

(I)

I have now accomplished the laborious narrative of the decline and fall of the Roman empire, from the fortunate age of Trajan and the Antonines to its total extinction in the West, about five centuries after the Christian era. At that unhappy period . . . [a]ll the subjects of the empire, who, by the use of the Latin language, more particularly deserved the name and privileges of Romans, were oppressed by the disgrace and calamities of foreign conquest; and the victorious nations of Germany established a new system of manners and government in the western countries of Europe. The majesty of Rome was faintly represented by the princes of Constantinople, the feeble and imaginary successors of Augustus. Yet they continued to reign over the East, from the Danube to the Nile and Tigris; the Gothic and Vandal kingdoms of Italy and Africa were subverted by the arms of Justinian; and the history of the *Greek* emperors may still afford a long series of instructive lessons and interesting revolutions.¹

This is the concluding paragraph of chapter 38, though not of volume III, of Gibbon's history, and he is recording that he has reached the end of the first of the three periods of the *Decline and Fall*. At a point in time we do not know, which may have been the later months of 1780, he decided to conclude volume III with *General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West*, printed immediately after chapter 38 but with no more introduction than its title to tell us its place in his work. We know from internal evidence² – though as ever we have none of Gibbon's working papers and his letters tell us little about his working life – that this essay had been in part written earlier, certainly before 1774, and it has been possible to study it as evidence of his thinking as and behalf before he began the *Decline and Fall*.³ There is also evidence – including the first sentence of the above quotation – that he revised and updated it

¹ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 507. Gibbon's emphasis.

² *A*, p. 324, n. 48. Womersley, 1994, I, pp. lxx–lxxvi, the editor's introduction, considers the extent to which the *Observations* may be read as subsequent to volume III and revised after its composition.

³ *NCG*, pp. 392–6.

preparatory to its publication in 1781, and it is both possible and obligatory to ask what part he intended it to play in his history as that reached the crucial moment of the western Fall. Here, however, readers have always encountered difficulties, for the obvious reason that the *General Observations* are not in fact a review of the story Gibbon has told, or the reflections on history he has put forward, in his first three volumes, and we are therefore puzzled to account for his placing them where he did and his reasons for doing so. Given the mixed character of the content of volume III after chapter 36, it is a temptation to regard the *General Observations*, as we regarded the first half of chapter 37, as a dissertation or digression written independently and here inserted for reasons that may lack coherence.

Chapter 38, however, has been an ambitious historical composition, introducing the broad theme of the relations between Roman and barbarian 'manners and government' in the post-imperial west, and we cannot altogether dismiss the close of volume III as a mere collection of pieces already written. It is necessary to review the *General Observations*, asking what they are and what they say, standing in the *Decline and Fall* where they do; though at the same time we must be cautious in supposing, as so many have, that in them Gibbon is disclosing the foundations of his historical thought. We have had opportunity of seeing these disclose themselves in the volumes and chapters we have studied. The *General Observations* are not such a chapter, nor a moment in the composition of the *Decline and Fall* as we have come to read it in the present volume.

The *Observations* may be thought of as divided into three segments. The first opens with a contrast between two Greeks: Plutarch, biographer and philosopher, who soothed Greek feelings by presenting their subjection to Rome as the work of blind Fortune, and the far greater historian Polybius, who explained it as the result of the three constituents of Roman virtue: the perfection of Rome's mixed constitution, the oath of every citizen to serve the republic in arms, and the discipline and tactics of the legions.⁴ Gibbon's rhetoric for once grows biblical:

The images of gold, or silver, or brass, that might serve to represent the nations and their kings, were successively broken by the *iron* monarchy of Rome.⁵

But the iron stands on feet of clay. We hear nothing of the stone cut without hands that is to shatter it; but from this point the *Decline and Fall* can be explained only as the decay of the three constituents of ancient virtue, and Gibbon can only present an erudite and philosophical version

⁴ Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 603–9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 509. Gibbon's emphasis. Note 'monarchy' not 'republic'.

of an ancient thesis. He proceeds to use language which will be (and still is) much quoted and, because of its apparent simplicity, much over-simplified.

The rise of a city, which swelled into an empire, may deserve, as a singular prodigy, the reflection of a philosophic mind. But the decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness. Prosperity ripened the principle of decay; the causes of destruction multiplied with the extent of conquest; and as soon as time or accident had removed the artificial supports, the stupendous fabric yielded to the pressure of its own weight. The story of its ruin is simple and obvious, and instead of inquiring *why* the Roman empire was destroyed, we should rather be surprised that it had subsisted so long.⁶

It is easy, but mistaken, to read this passage as the substitution of a monocausal explanation for a complex narrative. Mistaken, because Gibbon is saying that the single cause, ‘immoderate greatness’, multiplied (the word is his) the causes of destruction, so that these remained to be narrated. The historian is concerned with the what and the how as well as the why, and it might be remarked that Gibbon does not here tell us what the ‘artificial supports’ were or why they were artificial. If we suppose that the *General Observations* were rewritten, taking the form in which they were published and we read them, after the composition of chapters 17 through 38, we may enquire whether the vast extent of the empire’s frontiers – ‘the Euphrates, the Danube, the Rhine, and the Ocean’⁷ – and the complex tactics of containing oriental and barbarian pressures along their length, did not constitute a species of ‘immoderate greatness’ which in the end proved unsustainable for reasons independent of the decay of Polybian virtue Gibbon is narrating. He does not, however, say so.

The victorious legions, who, in distant wars –

*alibi quam Romae*⁸ –

acquired the vices of strangers and mercenaries, first oppressed the freedom of the republic, and afterwards violated the majesty of the purple. The emperors, anxious for their personal safety and the public peace, were reduced to the base expedient of corrupting the discipline which rendered them alike formidable to their sovereign and to the enemy; the vigour of the military government was replaced and finally dissolved by the partial institutions of Constantine; and the Roman world was overwhelmed by a deluge of Barbarians.⁹

This is the Polybian and Tacitean ‘first decline and fall’ introduced and studied in earlier volumes of this series, but it has been carried on through the *Historia Augusta* to a climax which owes most to Zosimus. Gibbon had a low opinion of that historian, but here he is making a major turning point out of his denunciations of Constantine’s separations of the *limitanei* from

⁶ *Ibid.* ⁷ *Ibid.* ⁸ For this see *FDF*, *passim*. ⁹ Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 509–10.

the *comitatenses* and of the civil from the military powers of provincial governors.¹⁰ To arrive at this point, however, the *Observations* are obliged – if Gibbon knew this at the time of writing them – to imply two destructive processes supposed as originating in the reforms of Diocletian: the crushing weight of over-taxation and the demoralisation of the municipal governing classes it produced. Is this what Gibbon meant by ‘the removal of artificial supports’? If so, what does his not mentioning it in the *General Observations* suggest about their relation to the chapters of his second volume?

He goes on to a further, and perhaps greater, division of authority carried out by Constantine: the foundation of Constantinople, which became the seat of an eastern empire, Greek rather than Latin, and differing from that ruled from Rome in its geography, history and culture, and so in the processes known as Decline and Fall. The translation of empire from west to east had been much blamed for its decay, and Gibbon concurs that the eastern emperors were often indifferent to the disintegration of the west and usually ineffective in their attempts to prevent it. The *General Observations*, it is worth noting, have nothing to say about the reign of Justinian, whose massive interventions in western history are to be the subject of Gibbon’s fourth volume, as he must have known as he completed his third; but he is already clear that Decline and Fall, considered as the decay of Roman virtue, is a Latin process, happening in Latin (and Latin-barbaric) history, and that if east Roman or Byzantine history contains a narrative of Decline and Fall, it must be one of another process. The question is whether he can relate this in terms other than Latin; is the history of the east to be other than the non-presence, not even the decay, of the virtue of the west? In volume III, he once wrote that the thousand years of eastern history were a narrative of ‘premature and perpetual decay’,¹¹ and in the *General Observations* he says that, though Constantinople could do nothing to save Rome,

[y]et the salutary event approved in some measure the judgment of Constantine. During a long period of decay –

and nothing else?

his impregnable city repelled the victorious armies of Barbarians, protected the wealth of Asia, and commanded, both in peace and war, the important straits which connect the Euxine and Mediterranean seas. The foundation of Constantinople more essentially contributed to the preservation of the East than to the ruin of the West.¹²

¹⁰ Above, ch. 17; Zosimus, 1982/2006, *passim*. ¹¹ Above, p. 371.

¹² Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 509–10. Modern scholars have explained the preservation of the empire less by the impregnability of the capital than by the military reorganisation of the frontier provinces.

But for what reasons will Gibbon be writing the history of that preservation, if it was for a thousand years the history of a decay?

(II)

The next paragraph has been read by not a few scholars – so many that they had best remain nameless – as disclosing the key to the *Decline and Fall* as a whole, whether it was written before or after the composition of the first three volumes. Christianity, these interpreters read it as saying, was the cause of the empire's fall, its failure to maintain its own values, and its inability to defend itself against the invading barbarians. The successive volumes of *Barbarism and Religion* – preceded and supported by the judgement of historians again too numerous to mention – have argued otherwise. The decline of ancient virtue was a process in ancient history, produced by causes there operating. We have just seen Gibbon enumerating them, not for the first time in our reading, in the *General Observations* themselves; and their destructive effects had developed on an empire-wide basis by the time of Diocletian, well before the time of Constantine. It had not been necessary for Gibbon to mention Christianity in his long accounts of the failure of the Augustan and Antonine monarchy, and endeavours to find it there encoded in a secret writing have not been found convincing. If Diocletian transformed the persecution of the church from a police action to a policy of state, it was because religious society was appearing the more attractive as ancient civil life decayed under the burden of empire; and Constantine's proclamation of Christianity as the empire's official religion produced both deep divisions of an utterly new kind, and new forms of political and ideological solidarity. Gibbon's judgement of Christianity was always ambivalent, but – it has been argued – he saw it less as destroying ancient Mediterranean civilisation than as replacing it by a new one. In chapters 37 and 38 he considered its double impact as invading barbarians both overthrew Roman culture and were assimilated to it.

With these assertions behind us on the pages of the present volume, let us now consider what he says of Christianity in the *General Observations* and published in a form which might be taken for his final word. Initially, he seems to be confirming the interpretation so often advanced of his work; the new religion advanced the decay of empire by substituting the values of another world for the virtues of this one. It is the Enlightened contention, advanced with brutal directness

As the happiness of a *future* life is the great object of religion, we may hear without surprise or scandal –

if he did not intend scandal, we know that he knew he occasioned it –

that the introduction, or at least the abuse of Christianity, had some influence on the decline and fall of the Roman empire.

When were these words written?

The clergy successfully preached the doctrines of patience and pusillanimity; the active virtues of society were discouraged, and the last remains of military spirit were buried in the cloister; a large portion of public and private wealth was consecrated to the specious demands of charity and devotion; and the soldier's pay was lavished on the useless multitudes of both sexes who could only plead the merits of abstinence and chastity.¹³

It was for men to bear arms and act in public, for women to bear children and act in the household; this is enough to explain the Enlightened hatred of celibacy. All this, of course, has already appeared in the indictment of monasticism carried on in chapter 37. The church is a parody of political society, pusillanimous only in its rejection of patriotism; its feuds and factions are rooted not only in the passions of the human heart, but in the impossibility of stating disputes about God in discussable form. The conflicts between rival claimants to orthodoxy

were sometimes bloody and always implacable; the attention of the emperors was diverted from camps to synods; the Roman world was oppressed by a new species of tyranny; and the persecuted sects became the secret enemies of their country.

Gibbon is certainly moving on from a philosophic analysis of historic change to ascribing a direct causal role to Christianity in weakening the empire; but he retains the historian's conviction that, especially in the establishment of causes, there are always two sides to the story and more going on than meets the eye. He continues without a break;

Yet party-spirit, however pernicious or absurd, is a principle of union as well as of dissension. The bishops, from eighteen hundred pulpits, inculcated the duty of passive obedience to a lawful and orthodox sovereign;

language we have met before. They had their own sociability:

their frequent assemblies and perpetual correspondence maintained the communion of distant churches;

as had both drawn persecution upon them and enabled them to survive it. Once again, Gibbon permits himself to see the social if not the political values in the primitive congregations:

¹³ Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 510–11. Gibbon's emphasis.

the benevolent temper of the Gospel was strengthened, though confined by the spiritual alliance of the Catholics.

Christianity's worst features are explained in part by a history it has not made.

The sacred indolence of the monks was devoutly embraced by a servile and effeminate age; but if superstition had not afforded a decent retreat, the same vices would have tempted the unworthy Romans to desert, from baser motives, the standard of the republic.

The flight to the desert was an effect more than a cause of the social collapse attributed to the late empire; and once again, Christianity is allowed a measure of sociability:

the pure and genuine influence of Christianity may be traced in its beneficial though imperfect, effects on the barbarian proselytes of the North. If the decline of the Roman empire was hastened by the conversion of Constantine, his victorious religion broke the violence of the fall, and mollified the ferocious temper of the conquerors.¹⁴

(III)

Christianity, then, plays a mixed role in 'the progress of society in Europe' during and after the fall of the Latin empire. It is with this progress that Gibbon deals in the next paragraph of the *General Observations*, proceeding immediately to the present tense of what has been termed 'the Enlightened narrative'. Europe, he says, may be considered as

one great republic, whose various inhabitants have attained almost the same level of politeness and cultivation. The balance of power will continue to fluctuate, and the prosperity of our own or the neighbouring kingdoms may be alternately exalted or depressed; but these partial events cannot essentially injure our general state of happiness, the system of arts, and laws, and manners, which so advantageously distinguish, above the rest of mankind, the Europeans and their colonies.¹⁵

These words render peculiarly interesting the questions of when Gibbon wrote them and what he intended by publishing them. They present an ideal picture of the 'Enlightenment utopia', the civilised *ancien régime* and plurality of states which controlled Europe following the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713; the states system which furnished the endpoint of the great histories tracing 'the Enlightened narrative'. We know that Gibbon began writing the *General Observations* before the death of Louis XV, and

¹⁴ For all passages quoted, see Womersley, 1994, II, p. 511. Condemnation and mitigation occur on the same page.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

it is possible that this passage belongs to that time; but by the time of its publication in 1781, Britain and the 'neighbouring kingdom' of France had for upwards of three years been enemies in the War of the American Revolution, a turning point in the 'second Hundred Years War' for control of empire in America and India, and in the progress towards crisis in Britain and revolution in France. If 'the system of arts and laws and manners' denotes the Enlightened patriciate which Burke was to see the Revolution as aiming to destroy, and if the Revolutionary assault was as apocalyptically astonishing to Gibbon as to Burke, prophets of catastrophe were not lacking in 1781. Raynal and Diderot had brought out the second edition of the *Histoire des Deux Indes*, which Gibbon read and which depicted the European states as undermined by their own empires beyond Europe, and in need of a radical restatement of an 'Enlightenment project'.¹⁶ These authors had seen the European states system as secure only from 1713 to 1739, when it had been overturned by the English hunger for a universal monopoly of trade. Gibbon, who following his Parisian sojourn of 1777 had published a defence of British conduct against the French case for declaring war in 1778,¹⁷ was content in 1781, and again in 1788, to see the Utrecht order as still in effect, guiding his readers in understanding their own place in history.

We may see things otherwise. The Utrecht order was threatened not only by the American and French revolutions – the *Decline and Fall* was finally published on the eve of the latter – but by the partitions of Poland and the rise of Russian power on the Black Sea, and we may prefer to see Gibbon as writing during Franco Venturi's *prima crisi dell'Antico Regime*. He seems to have had no such sense of crisis, and chooses the moment of publishing his third volume to present Europe not as threatened by revolution and empire, but as secure against barbarism. The *Observations* proceed:

The savage nations of the globe are the common enemies of civilised society; and we may inquire, with anxious curiosity, whether Europe is still threatened with a repetition of those calamities which formerly oppressed the aims and institutions of Rome. Perhaps the same reflections will illustrate the fall of that mighty empire, and explain the probable causes of our actual security.¹⁸

The years in which Britain was establishing empire in India, and Russia over provinces formerly Ottoman, seem unlikely to have generated European fears of barbarian invasion, and there seems no need to charge Gibbon with paranoid dread of a colonialised Other. In what follows he in fact demonstrates why there can be no such menace, and reflects philosophically on the place of Europe in world history. The Romans, he says,

¹⁶ *BSE*, ch. 17. ¹⁷ Gibbon, 1779. ¹⁸ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 511.

knew nothing about the Germano-Scythian world beyond the Rhine and Danube and had no control over it. This *barbaricum* – not yet a ‘Europe’ – of pastoral tribes increasingly nomadic as the eye moved east was ‘shaken by the distant revolutions of China’, and Gibbon’s narrative is increasingly that of Joseph de Guignes, and an explanation of the climactic Decline and Fall.

The Huns, who fled before a victorious enemy, directed their march towards the West . . . The flying tribes who yielded to the Huns assumed in their turn the spirit of conquest; the endless column of Barbarians pressed on the Roman empire with accumulated strength and if the foremost were destroyed, the vacant space was instantly replenished by new assailants.

This *officina gentium*, however, has ceased to exist.

Such formidable emigrations no longer issue from the North; and the long repose, which has been imputed to the decrease of population, is the happy consequence of the progress of arts and agriculture.

There has occurred a conquest of the pastoral North, extending the full length of Eurasia, by agricultural, manufacturing and commercial peoples organised into states; a process both medieval and modern, originating in Gibbon’s western eye with the Frankish expansion east of the Rhine, and replacing the *barbaricum* with what may be termed ‘Europe’. This has been carried on into Slavic and Lithuanian lands, and by the advance of the Russian state into Asia as far as the Chinese frontiers, outflanking Islam on the north as the European voyages outflanked it on the oceans (so Raynal would say though Gibbon does not). There has occurred a revolution in world history, and the age of the nomads is at an end.

The plough, the loom and the forge are introduced on the banks of the Volga, the Oby, and the Lena; and the fiercest of the Tartar hordes have been taught to tremble and obey.¹⁹

A footnote (of what date?) tells us that Gibbon is not unaware of the Qing role in conquering the last of the Genghizid khanates. But these conquests, he says, ‘are precarious, nor will I venture to ensure the safety of the Chinese empire’.²⁰ He is probably not anticipating the European maritime dominance of the Chinese coasts, but echoing the widespread conviction that dynastic rule was fragile if unchanging. There is no echo of Leibniz’s contention that the Treaty of Nerchinsk might prove the greatest event in history since the empire of Charlemagne;²¹ but in spite of recent rebellions in the Russian realms, he is prepared to see Catherine II’s

¹⁹ For all passages quoted, see p. 512. ²⁰ *Ibid.*, n. 6.

²¹ Mungello, 1977; Ching and Oxtoby, 1992.

empire as part of the European Enlightenment. He contrasts the plurality of western states²² with the immoderate extent, the insecure centralisation of power, and the lack of a social base capable of maintaining the armies, that characterised the Roman empire. There is now a succession, from Russia to Britain, of warlike populations organised into states and wielding gunpowder in their defence; and 'if a savage conqueror should issue from the deserts of Tartary', he would have to contend with each of these in turn, with the refuge of oceanic America at their backs. 'Europe is secure from any future irruption of Barbarians; since before these can conquer, they must cease to be barbarous.'²³ What need, we may ask, does Gibbon see for this reassurance?

The progress of society offers Gibbon one more reason for a minimally cautious optimism, for which, in spite of the extinction of the barbarian threat, he still feels a need. We may wish to say that in the *General Observations* he was writing the *éloge* of the Enlightened *ancien régime*; he saw the end of the barbarian without, but not the future of the barbarian within. David Hume had seen the danger of Britain as a scene of faction and fanaticism,²⁴ but Gibbon, who lived through the Gordon riots and the 'revolution that did not happen',²⁵ came to lose his passing fears of civil war.²⁶ What he did not foresee, though Raynal and Diderot perhaps did, was the revolutionary convulsion that overcame the states of the *ancien régime* a decade later; and when he watched it from Lausanne, his reaction was that of Burke in England. He realised that there was such a thing as an anti-religious enthusiasm, and found that he was being blamed for it. There is no foreknowledge of these things in the *General Observations* or in the *Decline and Fall* generally, but there is a willingness to imagine an apocalyptic death of society, in which everything that makes men human disappears with it, and they revert to the condition of

the *human savage* naked both in mind and body, and destitute of laws, of arts, of ideas, and almost of language.²⁷

He certainly did not think this had happened in the barbarised provinces of the western empire, but the death of classical civilisation, which he could idealise as a totality, was enough to make him envisage an end of

²² Womersley, 1994, II, p. 513. ²³ pp. 513–15.

²⁴ Pocock, 1985, ch. 7. McDaniel (2013) shows how Adam Ferguson, in his history of the Roman republic, expressed the fear of a pseudo-democratic military despotism in imperial Britain. He would have done better to fear it in revolutionary France, where he lived to see it.

²⁵ The phrase used by Herbert Butterfield (Butterfield, 1949) for the English disorders of 1780.

²⁶ *Letters*, II, pp. 234, 236, for civil war; 242–6 for the Gordon riots.

²⁷ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 515. Gibbon's emphasis.

society as well as a beginning. He therefore asked whether a civilised people could indeed relapse into savagery, and from what points they could begin rebuilding society if they once lost it. He replied that ‘no people, unless the face of nature is changed, will relapse into their original Barbarism’²⁸ because the building blocks were ineliminable and their historical effects could never quite disappear. Neither individual genius nor the organisation of society could ensure the survival of the most minimal social gains; but

Fortunately for mankind, the more useful, or, at least, more necessary arts, can be performed without superior talents or national subordination; without the powers of *one*, or the union of *many*. Each village, each family, each individual, must always possess both ability and inclination to perpetuate

a series of basic skills, ranging from the use of fire to ‘the cultivation of corn’ and ‘the rudiments of navigation’, of which Gibbon’s list is long enough to be somewhat unconvincing. His emphasis is not on invention but on perpetuation; he is saying that once acquired, the simpler of these skills cannot be forgotten even in the worst reversion to savagery. ‘They have been successively propagated; they can never be lost.’

The splendid days of Augustus and Trajan were eclipsed by a cloud of ignorance – no doubt monastic –

and the barbarians subverted the laws and palaces of Rome. But the scythe, the invention or emblem of Saturn, still continued annually to mow the harvests of Italy; and the human feasts of the Laestrigons have never been renewed on the coasts of Campania.²⁹

Civilised Europeans have even been communicating these skills to savages who have not thought of them for themselves. The last footnote in volume III informs us that under the benevolent eye of George III, navigators from Furneaux to Cook have ‘introduced into the islands of the South Sea the vegetables and animals most useful to human life’³⁰ (with what ecological and environmental consequences historians of Hawai‘i, Tahiti and Aotearoa are still pointing out). Gibbon famously concludes the first trilogy of the *Decline and Fall*:

We may therefore acquiesce in the pleasing conclusion that every age of the world has increased and still increases –

by minimal accretions occurring in spite of catastrophes –

²⁸ *Ibid.* ²⁹ For the whole passage, *ibid.*, p. 516. ³⁰ *Ibid.*, n. 15.

the real wealth, the happiness, the knowledge, and perhaps the virtue, of the human race.³¹

This is less a theory of progress than one of catastrophe, survival and accumulation. Gibbon concluded the *General Observations*, and what proved to be the first half of his completed project, with an essay in the philosophy of history, suggested by but not belonging to the complex series of historical narratives he was engaged in assembling. In concluding the present series, we must ask questions it does not answer: how the conclusion of his first trilogy points to the problems he faced in constructing its successor, and how what he published in 1781 enables us to look ahead to what he was to publish in 1788.

³¹ Ibid.

24 Gibbon's first trilogy and its successor volumes. Conclusion of the present series

The end of the western empire was not the end of Gibbon's history of the west. He had already begun indicating a history of the post-Roman kingdoms: first by claiming, at the end of chapter 36, that the monarchy of Theodoric in Italy 'deserved the attention of mankind'; second, by devoting most of chapter 38 to the origins and historical character of the Frankish kingdom in Germany and Gaul. There remained, however, the huge problem which we expect to dominate the remaining volumes of the *Decline and Fall*: how Gibbon was going to treat the history of the eastern empire, which already differed from the western and had survived it for just short of a thousand years. He had already indicated that he would defer taking it up until he began a new volume, and this renders more striking the detailed investigation of the Frankish kingdom in the penultimate chapter of volume III. There has already occurred the ominous remark that Byzantine history is one of 'premature and perpetual decay', which arouses the suspicion that Gibbon has nothing to say of it that he has not already said in recounting the Decline and Fall of the west, and cannot continue this into any such interaction between Roman and barbaric elements as that which constitutes the post-Roman history of the latter. Gibbon, we know, had two grand narratives ready to hand in narrating the history of the empire and of a western Europe after it; they supplied him and his contemporaries with a historic present in which they were living and were about to undergo revolutionary change; but we begin to suspect that he had no grand narrative to hand with which to narrate and make present a history of eastern empire or eastern Europe. This problem accompanies us as we begin to ask how the *Decline and Fall* will proceed towards its second set of three volumes.

These did not appear in print until 1788, but we know that Gibbon began work upon them during the early months of 1782,¹ and it is therefore justifiable to look for connections between volume III and volume IV;

¹ EGLH, p. 168.

and in his treatment of the Frankish kingdom in the former, while deferring the Gothic until the latter, we have begun to find them problematic. Volume IV opens the second of the three periods into which Gibbon in 1776 had proposed dividing the *Decline and Fall*: that ‘from Justinian to Charlemagne’; and we may be justified in reading these words as indicating that the destruction of the Gothic kingdom by the armies of the eastern emperor opened the way to a period at the end of which the Roman papacy would appeal to the Frankish kingdom and set it up as a new, if somewhat fictitious, empire in the west. There is a complex history to be written here, which we expect to find taking shape in Gibbon’s fourth volume.

It will, however, be a western history, dealing with western barbarism and western religion as well as resurgent empire; but Gibbon is fully aware that it is one feature of an eastern history he has yet to begin writing – or at least to take up from the condition in which he left it at the death of Theodosius I. As far back as the opening chapters of volume II, he had recognised it as the history of a new imperial culture, driven by forces intimated in describing its foundation by Constantine; but he possessed no established narrative of these forces or this history, whereas he could not avoid seeing western history as driven by forces contained within itself. Nevertheless, he could not avoid eastern history; the narrative of the wars of Justinian, together with the history of the barbarian kingdoms overthrown in their course, was known to him from the work of the Byzantine historian Procopius, the last classical or post-classical historian he followed.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that volume IV opens with a chapter (39), relating and studying the reign of Theodoric and his kingdom in Italy. This is an episode in western history, and Gibbon treats it as such before considering the consequences of its overthrow for both west and east. Before proceeding to the latter, he presents another chapter (40) in which the reign of Justinian (and needless to say Theodora) is related in full as an episode in a strictly Byzantine history; this is now considered (almost for the first time since volume II) as a history in its own right. Chapter 40 is a portrait of richness and complexity, for the reason that it is based on the three very different histories provided by Procopius: the history of Justinian’s reign, the satirical and pornographic counter-history known as the *Anecdotes* or *Secret History*, and the encomium on the great buildings, including Hagia Sophia, erected during that reign. We enter upon a portrait of Constantinopolitan culture, including its acquisition of a silk industry from China² and the abolition of the schools of Athens and the consulate inherited from Rome;³ we are no longer in late antique history,

² Womersley, 1994, II, pp 579–84. ³ *Ibid.*, pp. 610–17.

and it seems (misleadingly?) that the eastern empire has begun to generate its own.

Chapter 41, 'Conquests of Justinian in the West', relates the wars of the flawed hero Belisarius and his conquests of the Vandal kingdom set up in Africa by Genseric, and of the Gothic kingdom in Italy. Both are narrated in the classic manner, though we are aware that each will leave a power vacuum to be filled by forces not belonging to the empire; we are at the height of an extension of empire that will not last long. In chapter 42, 'State of the Barbaric World', we are on the frontiers of the eastern empire from the Danube to the Euphrates, and something like a major crisis seems to arise. The Germanic Lombards appear and set out on the well-travelled road from Pannonia into Italy. The pressures originating on the Chinese borderlands repeat themselves as the Turks, still a steppe people of whom de Guignes is the historian, are set in motion, and the Avars and Bulgars, also nomad tribes, and the squalidly agricultural Slavonians successively appear on the Euxine and Danubian frontiers of an empire incapable of defending them. The history of the Huns, Goths and Germans is replicated; Slavic peoples penetrate Illyria as far as Greece, the Avars have a history before them like that the heirs of Attila might have had, and the Turks become a major presence on the borders of both the Roman and Persian empires.⁴ Something like a history of power relations throughout western Eurasia comes into view.

In chapter 43, a Gothic revival in Italy is finally defeated by the eunuch general Narses, a Frankish intervention is repelled, and the reign of Justinian – in many ways inglorious but the scene of major events – closes with an account of the catastrophic pandemic of 542. Gibbon has been writing world history and the history of empires, but something now happens which the history of historiography has not led us to expect. Chapter 44 is a closely reasoned, technical and philosophical history of Roman law, from the Twelve Tables to the Code and Digest of Justinian; and where the Codex Theodosianus was as much a source of historical information as a body of law, the latter are a major historical event, not only in the history of law but in the place of law in history. They are of central importance in the interpretation of the later *Decline and Fall*, but all that need be attempted here is some understanding of their place in the transition from the volumes of 1781 to those of 1788. In chapter 38 Gibbon had outlined a history of the western barbaric kingdoms resting on the interactions between Roman law and codified but unwritten custom, and had excluded Britain and England from it on the grounds of the

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 688–700.

disappearance of any Roman component. This interest can be backdated to his student years at Lausanne, when he had been a reader of Giannone's *Storia Civile del Regno di Napoli*,⁵ and in the volumes of the *Decline and Fall* we find him relying on north Italian historians – Sigonio, Muratori, Maffei⁶ – for the presence and role of Roman law in the *regnum italicum* and the medieval empire. Chapter 44 is both a contribution on the grand scale to legal and philosophical history, and a step towards that history of the post-Roman west which Gibbon did not write but which was always present in his mind as he wrote his later volumes.

In chapters 45 and 46, the history of empire returns but is brought to two points at which it approaches transformation. The Avars are established on the Danube and the Lombards in trans-Paduan Italy – the familiar combination of Scythian and German barbarism – but the two significant subheadings in chapter 45 are 'State of Italy under the Lombards and Exarchs' and 'Character and Pontificate of Gregory the First'.⁷ Gregory is the first of the great popes to be portrayed at length, and with him the papacy becomes a major actor in the secular narrative. There will come – though we have not reached it yet – the definitive moment of its appeal to the *monarchie française* against both Lombards and the eastern empire. It is of great importance to observe that Gregory and his pontificate are presented in an ironic light; all that can be said against popery and superstition is balanced against the role of both – not forgetting the cults of saints and martyrs they promote – in re-edifying the city of Rome and furthering some recovery of civil society. This double role of the papacy will persist until the last chapters of the *Decline and Fall*. More immediately, we have met with the first of two forces that are about to transform history.

If chapter 45 is western history, concerned with the consequences of Byzantine actions rather than the actions themselves, its successor opens up the broad theme of relations between the Roman and Persian empires, which have only recently returned to the narrative. The ambitious Chosroes II forms an alliance with the Avars, now a Hun-like power on the Danube, thus threatening Constantinople on both fronts, and the succession of emperors is interrupted by the usurpation of Phocas. It had been at this point that Flavio Biondo suggested dating the beginnings of an *inclinatio* of the eastern empire.⁸ Phocas is overthrown by Heraclius, and there follows a succession of wars whose huge sweep has something unreal about it, as if the armies could make conquests they are unable to

⁵ *EEG*, p. 80.

⁶ For his use of all three, consult the bibliographical Index to Womersley, vol. III.

⁷ Womersley, 1994, III, pp. 853–71, 874–9. ⁸ *FDF*, ch. 9, pp. 196–7.

convert into permanent occupations. The Persians overrun Syria and even Egypt; the counter-offensives of Heraclius carry him into the heart of Persia itself, where Chosroes perishes. Like others on this frontier before it, this war ends with a treaty; but not before both emperors have been informed of the exploits of a new alliance of Arabs, followers of a prophet named Muhammad, of whom neither has previously heard. We are on the brink, says Gibbon, of 'a mighty revolution'.⁹ It will eclipse in breadth and depth anything achieved by the barbarians whose overthrow of the western empire gives the *Decline and Fall* its reason for existing. Though the period 'from Justinian to Charlemagne' has not reached conclusion, Gibbon has arrived at a turning point in his history equal to the conversion of Constantine, and it would be reasonable to expect him to conclude volume IV here.¹⁰

He does not do so, but follows his practice, which we now see as usual, of concluding each climactic volume with a chapter or chapters not clearly related to what has preceded them. Chapter 47,¹¹ like 21 before it, goes deeply and carefully into the origins of Christian disputatious theology as far back as the legendary times before the Fourth Gospel; there is mention of Cerinthus, the Ebionites and the Docetes. The issue, however, is not Christ's consubstantiality with the Father, but the conjunction of the human and divine in him as incarnate word; not his person but his nature or natures. It becomes a matter of orthodoxy and heresy, and the emperors are as deeply and disastrously involved in it as they were in the struggle between Arians and Athanasians after the Council of Nicaea. Gibbon is presenting the history of the church and empire in the century separating the Council of Ephesus in 431 from the fifth general council of Chalcedon in 553; a history whose beginnings under Theodosius II he allowed to pass unmentioned when writing the history of that reign in chapter 33. It has been a postponement of exceptional length, enough to leave gaps in the narrative. Of these a gap between volumes IV and V will be the greatest.

Gibbon explores the theology of the contest with care and in detail, seldom resorting to derision or invective, except when he mentions Cyril, patriarch of Alexandria, whom he detests for many reasons. As in the history of the Arian controversy, he leaves it in no doubt that he thinks the nature of God inexpressible and debate over it unresolvable and so meaningless. What concerned him, as ever, were the civil consequences of such a debate: dogmatism, intolerance, persecution, and in this case intra-dynastic religious and civil war, followed by the alienation of provinces from the empire. The full narrative of volume IV's last chapter is not to be

⁹ Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 930–1. 'Mahomet' is Gibbon's regular spelling. ¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ There is little evidence as to when Gibbon began work on this chapter.

studied here; but when Gibbon reaches the climactic councils of the late seventh century, he inserts two subheadings which tell us where he is bound: 'Union of the Greek and Latin Churches' and 'Perpetual Separation of the Oriental Sects'.¹² These are the Nestorian and Monophysite churches – a word he does not here use – of Syria and Egypt, and the history of 'oriental' Christianity is from this point to lie altogether outside Greco-Roman history and that of the church in the empire. It is a development in world history as well as ecclesiastical. The Muslim conquests of Syria and Egypt are of course central to it, and Gibbon has already hinted that these were facilitated by the discontent of their churches under imperial persecution; his move into 'oriental' history, which began when he was of schoolboy age,¹³ begins to take him in directions Muslim as well as Christian.

Chapter 47 and volume IV, however, conclude with excursions into the history of Christianity outside the orbit of history either Greek or Roman, as if Gibbon were wondering what became of that religion when no longer confronting ancient culture in decline. He pursues the Nestorian churches into Persia, India, Tibet and China, as far as the empire of Kublai and the Yuan dynasty in the fourteenth century, and returns by way of the Coptic churches in Egypt to survey the role of Monophysite Christianity in shaping the history of Abyssinia – his term for Ethiopia – down to the expulsion of the Jesuits in the sixteenth century, after which

the gates of that solitary realm were forever shut against the arts, the sciences and the fanaticism of Europe,¹⁴

words he could have used of Japan at the same time. Volume IV closes on this sonorous note, and Gibbon is clearly indicating that the turn from the Latin middle ages to the long decay of Byzantium sets him free to write history on any scale he wishes. To complete the transition from the first trilogy to the second, however, we must look to the opening chapters of volume V.

During 1783, Gibbon removed from London to Lausanne, where he arrived on 17 September. It seems that he took chapters 39 through 46 with him in draft form, and completed chapter 47 during the ensuing winter, though the scope of its retrospect suggests that he may have been working on it for some time. Since no manuscripts of the *Decline and Fall* seem to exist, we are without knowledge of just how what Gibbon wrote in Lausanne became what his London editors printed and published five years later, and are forced to construct our image of how the work grew entirely from its final character in print. Subject to that warning, we may

¹² Womersley, 1994, II, pp. 977–8. ¹³ *EEG*, pp. 28–42.

¹⁴ Womersley, 1994, II, p. 1002.

observe that volume IV breaks off in the middle of the reign of Heraclius, and does not complete the period 'from Justinian to Charlemagne'. It is at this moment, however, that the *Decline and Fall* changes character. Gibbon opens volume V with a 'Plan of the Fifth and Sixth Volumes',¹⁵ which presents volume IV as having introduced what is here termed the second trilogy, and explains the character of the latter. In chapter 48 he reviews the succession of the Greek emperors from Heraclius to the end of the Comnenian dynasty, and pronounces it a tedious chronicle of dynastic and ecclesiastical palace intrigues, worth no more than a bare recital. This suggests – and it is with this that subsequent historians have quarrelled – that there is no history of the eastern empire as an imperial structure, containing the causes of its strength and weakness; and Gibbon has no more to offer here than the rhetoric of despotism and clericalism, virtue and decline. He has, however, a plan already offered which sets out the strategy of the second trilogy, as it has begun to take shape.

As the east Romans are incapable of any action worth recording, so they produce no historians capable of recording them (a result foretold by Tacitus long ago)

and we close the volume of copious barrenness, still ignorant of the causes of events, the characters of the actors, and the manners of the times, which they celebrate or deplore. The observation which has been applied to a man, may be extended to a whole people, that the energy of the sword is communicated to the pen, and it will be found by experience, that the tone of history will rise or fall with the spirit of the age.

There could be no clearer evidence that Gibbon's vision, of both history and historiography, was still ancient in character. We are not told how tone and spirit are connected in his own modernity.

From these considerations, I should have abandoned without regret the Greek slaves and their servile historians, had I not reflected that the fate of the Byzantine monarchy is *passively* connected with the most splendid and important revolutions which have changed the state of the world. The space of the lost provinces was immediately replenished with new colonies and rising kingdoms; the active virtues of war and peace deserted from the vanquished to the victorious nations; and it is in their origin and conquests, in their religion and government, that we must explore the causes and effects of the decline and fall of the Eastern empire.¹⁶

Gibbon is establishing the agenda to be followed by himself as author and ourselves as his readers and historians. He enumerates the active peoples whose histories are to be written:¹⁷ a formidable list, close to a

¹⁵ Womersley, 1994, III, pp. 25–6. ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26; Gibbon's emphasis.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 26–7.

sketch of the history of the pre-global world. The barbarian kingdoms of the west retrace their historic journey, colonising the former *barbaricum* and creating a 'Europe' north of the Danube. Their Roman Christianity competes with the Orthodoxy of the Bulgarian and Kievan principalities established outside the Byzantine frontiers, and 'Europe' assumes its historic shape. On a far greater scale, the conquests of the Muslim Arabs undo the world inherited by Rome from the Macedonians, and remap the *système de l'univers* in all Eurasia west of China, through a Mediterranean whose coasts north and south now confront each other. Finally, the Turks, alone among de Guignes's steppe peoples in developing a capacity for durable empire, acquire control over western Islam and the Byzantine territories east and west of the Bosphorus. At this time, Enlightened historians begin the story of the modern European states system, but though Gibbon knows it, he prefers to write that of the city of Rome, and says nothing of the decision by Raynal and his colleagues to treat the Ottoman acquisition of Egypt as the starting point for Muslim and European competition for control over the commerce of the global oceans.¹⁸ Though Gibbon's last two volumes look out from the borders of the east Roman empire to outline a history on an intercontinental scale, he does not write it systematically, but as a series of narratives loosely but intelligibly connected by their historians. If there is a controlling narrative in these volumes, it is that of the Crusades and the consequences of the crime of 1402. This, however, does not make them a single-themed indictment of western Christianity.

Barbarism and Religion has been an enterprise in situating the writings of Gibbon and his peers in the settings furnished by a discourse of Roman and post-Roman history of great antiquity and continuity, constituting a highly contestable history of ancient, medieval and early modern western Europe down to the moment of Enlightened modernity in which Gibbon wrote the *Decline and Fall*. It has been possible to study that discourse in ways sometimes reaching beyond Gibbon himself. As he leaves Gothic Rome and Frankish Gaul, however, and turns after postponement to Greco-Roman Constantinople, we find him complaining that this discourse no longer serves him, and that he must supply – none too hopefully – a plurality of histories to fill the gap left by the absence of any unifiable history of Byzantium or the world succeeding it. Scholars wishing to continue the enterprise of *Barbarism and Religion* through the *Decline and Fall*'s last volumes should therefore enquire, not only on what sources Gibbon drew in constructing this plurality of histories, but in what

¹⁸ *BSE*, pp. 241–5.

continuities of discourse he found himself participant, and what was the condition of west European learning regarding the fields of history he proposed considering. They should also enquire whether these were constructed by western historians studying exotic fields in the light of their own understanding, or whether the cultures they now studied had achieved historiographies of their own making – as Gibbon, after all, had said they must have if they were to be worth studying. Clearly, it would be rash to expect too much; but equally unwise to expect too little of Edward Gibbon or the late Enlightenment's capacity for universal history.

The *Decline and Fall*, it may be suggested in conclusion, was written and published at the last moment when a history of its kind could have been conceived and constructed: as a product of Franco Venturi's *prima crisi dell'Antico Regime*, the years after 1763 when Hume,¹⁹ Raynal²⁰ and Ferguson²¹ thought that the struggle between the British and French empires had subverted the order of the European states and would lead to revolutionary consequences for one or the other. In spite of his service in parliament during the American war, Gibbon was aware of no such historical crisis; he was content to see Europe as proof against invasion by barbarians. He published his last volumes under the date 1 May 1788 with the remark 'next summer and the following winter will rapidly pass away'. They did; and by the end of his life six years later, Europe would be faced with a new history culminating not in Enlightenment, but in revolution, to be followed by counter-revolution and the profound changes which would lead historiography from its early modern to its modern condition – from humanism to historicism, and from the status of a leisurely pursuit for men of letters, to that of a public discourse by university professors deeply concerned with the state. There is a history to be written of the *Decline and Fall*'s reception and Gibbon's role in a world he did not see; but it will be largely, though never wholly, a passive rather than an active history, concerned not with Gibbon writing but with Gibbon being read. It is the former history which *Barbarism and Religion* has attempted to open up, carrying it as far as the climax if not the conclusion of the *Decline and Fall*.

¹⁹ Pocock, 1985, pp. 136–40. ²⁰ BSE, chs. 16, 17. ²¹ McDaniel, 2013.

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